Keep the Wolves from the Gates

by BC_Brynn

Summary

Members of the former Team Seven are reassigned. Kakashi and Iruka do their jobs to the best of their abilities. Sasuke leaves Konoha and enters the service industry (not voluntarily, mind you). Itachi protects his foolish little brother. Gaara makes a friend.

And neither Haku is ever far from Naruto’s mind.

Also, puppies!

Notes
Tl;dr: Bye, bye, canon. We’re parting ways. Also, the story swelled and I failed to cut it up into smaller pieces (it was supposed to have, like, twelve pages… oops). There was just too much happening. Too many characters. I have no self-control.

Prepare yourself – this is where it gets really weird.

Updates will be regular. I’m thinking twice a week - probably Wednesday and over the weekend.

Long version: Okay, a few points. The fucker grew to about two thousand percent of its original projected length. I would be surprised, but I’ve met myself, so I’m not. Sorry. I hope you still manage to enjoy it.

Most of this was written before Soft as an Unready Mind was even conceived of. There are some things that migrated to SaaUM, because headcanons. But SaaUM never would have been what it is without TYN, so. Worth it.

In TYN, Sasuke doesn’t have Orochimaru’s seal, so stuff is getting fixed, and he won’t get that far off the road of sanity. Still, he legitimately has a huge amount of issues to angst about.

Itachi is mostly re-retconned. Re: Older Brothers.

In other news, holy hell, the angst. This always happens to me. I try to start out lightly with something funny and fluffy and humorous, and then the weird mood strikes and suddenly I can see how un-funny those things would be in real life (re: Akamaru playing dead in Chuunin Exams, Sasuke’s fangirls, Jiraiya’s everything). Also, plot. There will be humour, just the ratio of funny to angsty has shifted.

Spoilery, detailed warnings are in the end note.
“Iruka-sensei!”

Iruka’s ability to gauge the situation based solely on the intensity of Naruto’s enthusiasm bordered on preternatural, so he was out of his seat and ready to body-flicker within the next instance.

Then Naruto appeared in the doorway, and the source of his glee became obvious.

“Where did you get that?” Iruka demanded, trying to incinerate the photograph in Naruto’s hands with his eyes. He knew the picture far too well, and had actually entertained a fool’s hope that all copies had been destroyed. He was about twelve in it, with his hair loose and damp, glaring upwards at Kakashi when he had noticed the camera – too late to dodge out of the shot.

“I knew it! I knew you’d have passed for a girl. You looked like a girl!” Naruto exclaimed, before he noticed the raincloud forming over Iruka’s head. “Uh… but… a very pretty girl? I mean, not as pretty as H-haku…” He paused; something dark flickered in his eyes before he blinked it away and continued with the embarrassed reassurance: “But… pretty.”

“Naruto…” Iruka growled, but he left it at that. The boy wasn’t teasing him – in fact, Iruka had no clue to whom he had been compared (after he had dismissed the puppy as an option), but he had the idea that the comparison itself was a compliment. Naruto seemed just genuinely fascinated, and he had never been good at filtering what he should and should not say out loud. “Where did you get this?”

He was sure that he knew the answer, although there was a slight chance that the Sandaime might have been in possession of the picture too, probably for blackmail-related purposes.

Naruto’s face was an answer enough.

Iruka raised one hand to stave off the impending avalanche of dissembling babble and put the other one on his hip. “Now, let’s talk just retribution. You did notice that you were set up, right?”

Naruto shrugged. “I knew he was doing something, but I didn’t figure out what until you looked mad, and it seemed worth it at the time?”

Iruka smirked. “I think he was trying to manipulate us into starting a prank war—”

Probably to keep people’s attention on them so Kakashi could go behind the scenes and do something underhanded while remaining unnoticed. Well, if he wanted their help, he should have asked.

“-and forgot that he might be motivating two top notch pranksters to unite against him.”

Naruto squinted. “Err… Iruka-sensei, I know we’re good enough not to get caught, but he’ll still know it was us.”

Iruka shrugged. “Does it matter?”

The boy gaped. “Does it matter?! He’s not going to hurt you, sensei, but he’s my Team Lead! You know how much pain I’d be in?” He tilted his head. “Or, wait, is this what ‘masochism’ means?”

Iruka froze. “Now, Naruto, where did you learn that word?”
He was going to have a talk with Anko.

“Look, you’re barking up the wrong tree here,” Anko said, filing her nails. “Take a bit of unsolicited advice – the chibi’s not really the right outlet for your newly discovered mothering instinct.”

“Mothering…?” Iruka stuttered. He wasn’t mothering! He was acting like a responsible adult!

Anko looked at him skeptically. Since she had been freed of Orochimaru’s seal there was an odd lightness around her, and one of its (at the moment regrettable) side-effects was that she started occasionally coming out of her shell.

“Stop and think,” she said. “How old is Naruto? What were you like at his age?” ‘What was I like?’ she didn’t add, but Iruka could hear it in the expectant silence.

It was hard to admit, but at thirteen Naruto was grown up enough and knowledgeable enough to not only know the word ‘masochism’, but also have a fairly good idea of its meaning. And Iruka knew that Anko wasn’t the one to teach that to Naruto.

Iruka kept forgetting that Naruto wasn’t really a child anymore. And thirteen honestly was not that young (Iruka himself at thirteen had already begun falling in love). Thinking back, he suspected that Naruto had had a disturbingly good idea about the adult ongoings from a far too young age (the strategy behind the application of his Oiroke no Jutsu required at least rudimentary understanding of lust), but there was no telling what he might have been exposed to while living partially on the streets.

Iruka should have realised all this when Naruto matter-of-factly requisitioned a particular ANBU for a seduction assignment. And then again when he misled Tsunade-sama into assuming that there was an intimate relationship between the two male Sannin.

It was a well-observed fact that those gennin teammates who survived until later in their career tended to either pursue romantic relationships together, or feel like any such relationship would be incestuous and inherently wrong. It was a dynamic Naruto had observed, too, and capitalised on when he developed the strategy for their mission in Tanzaku Gai.

Iruka was impressed. A little regretful for the untimely death of innocence, but impressed. Besides, this was Naruto. He would probably retain that air of innocence for the rest of his life.

“Yeah…” Anko drawled, having watched the entire thought process on his face. “You owe me a Dango Deluxe Family Pack. And a sparring session. I’m getting rusty with the basics. You’re welcome.”

Iruka nodded in thanks. “Anko-san, by any chance, do you have any insights into what Naruto might like as a present for getting promoted?”

Anko blinked at him. Then her eyes darkened and unfocused-

-and Iruka beat a hasty retreat before he learnt another thing about his former student that he never wanted to know.

“…and crash-pow! It is just a Bunshin! I hit the wall, but I do much wall-bouncing during my youthful training, so now I merely bounce back! I run for the other Shikamaru-kun at the top of my
Hinata was having a very odd dream. Everything was dark and soft, and an excited voice was telling her about a ninja fight.

“I jump! I kick! But lo! Shikamaru-kun is faster than he looks! He twists and weaves, for he is secretly a master of the Drunken Fist!”

Hinata wanted to giggle. Everything felt pleasantly floaty, and the story was fun.

“I must stop and praise him! I had no idea there was a master of such a splendid technique among my fellow contestants! Alas! As I stand still for an instance, Shikamaru-kun’s shadow has me in its grasp! Kagemane no Jutsu – success!” The speaker loudly blew his nose. “Shikamaru-kun is so hip!”

Hinata realised that everything seemed so dark because her eyes were closed. Opening them took more energy than she usually needed for handstand push-ups, but she succeeded.

“Thus I lose!” exclaimed a black and green blob that Hinata identified as her cousin’s teammate. Lee-san thumped his fist against his chest as though he were declaiming to an invisible audience. “For the Drunken Fist master is also a Bunshin! And the true Shikamaru-kun has remained hidden from my sight until now!”

Hinata wasn’t used to not having perfect eyesight. She tried to mold chakra, but couldn’t get even the slightest bit of control. Her Byakugan was inactive, her tenketsu dormant. She was in a hospital room, though, so she did not panic… yet.

Surely someone would explain?

Just as she thought it, Lee-san heaved a heavy sigh, pirouetted-

And noticed Hinata looking at him.

For an instance he remained frozen in shock, and then a wide, bright smile stretched over his face. “Hinata-san! You are awake! Please, remain calm, I will get a medic right away!”

Long acquaintance with Kakashi taught Iruka to not only treat but also subconsciously regard ninken as people. He wasn’t sure if it was the result of being considered Pack, or if they considered him Pack because of this mindset. He had never been officially Presented, but he had also not been treated like an outsider in years by any of the few canine members to whom he had been introduced.

“Thank you for agreeing to meet with me,” he said to the couple that occupied a patch of grass next to him. He had chosen the park as a neutral and yet comfortable place for them to meet, and there were several food stalls nearby, so he could make good on his invitation to dinner. If they preferred their meat raw, he was sure he could make a deal with the proprietor of the grill.

“It is about time, sensei,” said Kana-san. “We should be catching up on years’ worth of parent-teacher conferences.”

Iruka chuckled. “That is part of why I kept asking Naruto for an introduction.” He met first Kana-san’s eye and then Ya-san’s. “I wanted to thank you. For taking care of him when we failed him so badly.”
“We didn’t do it for gratitude,” replied Kana-san.

“And far as I can tell, you were one of the few humans Naruto could count on,” Ya-san pointed out.

Iruka guessed it might have seemed so. He had done his best, in the end – he had been Naruto’s teacher, and he had always accepted the responsibility inherent in that position. He liked to believe that he had done well enough.

But that did not somehow erase the memory of hating Naruto for years. He would carry that stain on his soul for the rest of his life.

“Well,” Ya-san spoke after a while of reflection, sardonically amused, “now that the formalities are out of the way, how about you tell us what prompted this meeting, Iruka-sensei?”

Iruka sighed. Busted.

“I – it occurred to me that I have not properly congratulated Naruto on his promotion. I would like to give him a gift and... well... I am out of ideas.”

The two ninen shared a long look over their respective glasses – the kind of look through which old married couples could carry entire conversations. Iruka watched them with mounting jitters.

Eventually Ya-san chuffed a laugh.

Kana-san resignedly shook her head. “Humans...”

“Ooh, supplies?” Naruto inquired when Iruka presented a basket full of food and drinks.

There wasn’t nearly enough food there to truly sate the hunger of a growing boy with a demon in his belly, but it would have to suffice for a picnic.

“Wait, this doesn’t look like much of a prank...?”

“I’ve already misused the power of my office to set up the prank,” Iruka replied blithely.

“Which of your offices?”

Iruka ignored the sarcasm. “And let’s leave revenge on your sensei to a time when I’m not bogged down with paperwork. I just thought we could eat outside,” he dissembled. “The weather is nice.”

The truth was a little bleaker. He had wanted to invite Naruto to his home. Sadly, Naruto’s sense of smell meant that no amount of tidying up and careful scene arrangement would disguise the fact that there were two people living there, or what they were to each other.

He was already uncomfortable just with Naruto knowing that Iruka had someone.

“This is different,” Naruto remarked, but let himself be led to a grassy slope usually populated by families. “You know, not that long ago all these people would scream and pull their kids away if they saw me here. It’s like the hitai-ate is magic.”

Oh, Iruka thought. He hadn’t even thought of that. He was so used to seeing Naruto automatically accepted among ninja that he had momentarily forgotten how the civilians might react.

Despite the initial reprieve from any histrionics, Naruto still cast a minor Henge – hiding the marks
on his cheeks, turning his hair brown and his t-shirt sky-blue, just enough of a change to make it unlikely that any civilian would recognise him and start a riot.

“I’m sorry about that,” Iruka professed. He was sorrier than he could explain without admitting to how much he used to despise the mere sight of Naruto – long ago, before he had even learnt Naruto’s name. Before Kakashi had looked at Iruka so coldly and nearly walked out of his life. “And I’m glad it’s getting better.”

“You’re making me nervous, sensei,” Naruto joked, except that it really wasn’t a joke.

Iruka didn’t mean to do that. This was supposed to be a happy occasion. “Naruto… there’s something I’ve been meaning to give to you for a while, but there just hasn’t been a good opportunity.” With how busy Iruka had been, and then the mission, and then preparations for the Inauguration, which also somehow turned out to be his responsibility – today was the first free afternoon he had had in more than six weeks.

He felt like if he let himself, he could close his eyes and instantly drop to sleep.

Naruto plopped down into the grass without waiting for Iruka to spread the blanket. He was right – the blanket was a childish cliché. Iruka resolved to keep it inside the storage seal where it belonged. Maybe he was trying too hard to play at a normal family – they weren’t normal. They were shinobi.

As Iruka sat down, the boy side-eyed him skeptically. “Uh… it’s not the Talk, right, sensei? ‘cause I’ve had that. Three times, from five different people, and by now it’s not even embarrassing anymore. And I ask questions. Like, personal questions. About the Talk-giver’s personal experience-”

Iruka snorted. “Alright, alright! You convinced me! Stop convincing. No, I know I’m years too late to give you the Talk, and I’m not really inclined to share my personal anecdotes on this subject. Except maybe the one about that one time… hm…” He thoughtfully rubbed his mouth.

He had more than one truly educational – and cautionary – tale that he could relay at least in very broad strokes. Kakashi had the unfortunate tendency to take Icha Icha as a series of dares, and Iruka had the even more unfortunate tendency to go along with it whenever the premise didn’t seem outright dangerous.

There was, for just a random example, that time with the Hokage’s desk. And the well-disguised ANBU guard.

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Grr. Iruka-sensei knew exactly how to make people hunger for whatever information he had to impart. He was a born teacher.

“Another time!” announced the super-sensei, smirking at Naruto’s frustrated growling. “Today is the day for gift giving, not for sharing confidences.”

“Gift? Uh, Iruka-sensei, my birthday is in October-”

“And I am perfectly aware of that, thanks.” That gave Naruto a pause, but Iruka-sensei didn’t say it meanly, so he guessed it probably wasn’t an accusation.

There was a reason why Naruto didn’t celebrate his birthday. And why other people celebrated with food and games and fireworks, but made it clear that Naruto himself wasn’t invited. And, well, Naruto knew how Iruka-sensei’s parents died. So. The topic was kind of a taboo.
“But, I realised that we haven’t celebrated your promotion! I didn’t mean to let that pass without acknowledgement—”

“You were busy!” Naruto protested. His sight blurred; he was about to start bawling. Iruka-sensei was acknowledging him! Again!

“That is no excuse!” Iruka-sensei protested back. “So, here is something for you. I hope it will help you in your career.”

It was a book. This could have gone one of two ways – Iruka-sensei was a teacher, so it was likely something educational, but he was also the co-owner of Dog-sensei’s Icha Icha collection and friends with Anko, so it might have been something _educational_.

“Fuuinjutsu?” Naruto read, startled.

“This is…” Iruka-sensei rubbed the back of his head. “Well, Yondaime-sama was famous for his work with seals. A prodigy! And so was the whole Uzumaki Clan. I am almost certain that you have an as-of-yet undiscovered talent for this, and it would be a crime to not let it develop.”

Naruto’s eyes welled. “Thanks, sensei…”

“Yeah, it’s a fucking crime nobody thought to start you on seals earlier, but see my utter lack of surprise. The Toad Sage would actually have to do something that didn’t involve his dick—”

“Anko-san?!”

Appearing seemingly out of nowhere like the ANBU she was, Anko-nee-san rolled her eyes and fell upon the food basket like a swarm of locusts. “You forgot to invite me to this shindig, doggy treat, so I invited myself. Think I don’t wanna celebrate? Let’s get _chuunin-chan_ good and proper drunk—”

“Let’s not,” Iruka hissed through clenched teeth.

Anko gulped down an onigiri and pouted. “Party pooper. Oh, fine. Naruto, put on a pretty face, and let’s go to town! I’m buying you some cool shit you can use to fuck up people while looking like—”

Knowing exactly where nee-san was going with this, Naruto oiroked into Naruko the trophy wife. “–yeah, that.”

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“Just figures,” Kiba-kun complained, walking through the doorway. “We spend every free moment at Hinata’s bedside, and she wakes up during Lee’s _sumertime of manly youthfulness_ monologue—”

“Can you imagine a better incentive to escape?” Shino-kun inquired a little unkindly.

In Hinata’s opinion Lee-san was friendly and enthusiastic, and if he sometimes required a little more energy to communicate with, it was hardly a great bother. She had never had the opportunity to befriend him, but he was nice enough to come visit his teammate’s cousin and speak to her regularly ever since Manami-sensei told him it helped people in coma wake up.

Hinata wished Lee-san had stayed long enough for her to thank him. There was a bouquet of wildflowers in a vase on the bedside, too, and Hinata was sure no one in her family had brought those. And – she glanced at her teammates – she doubted it had been either of them. Despite the fact that Shino-kun’s kikaichu had already found the flowers and were scouring them for nectar, even
though they could only truly feed on raw chakra.

“It is good to know you are on the mend,” Shino-kun said simply, arms folded in front of his chest.

Kiba-kun stepped from foot to foot a few times and then huffed. “Whatever. Hey, Hinata, took your time waking up, huh? You can’t keep skipping team training like this…”

Hinata opened her mouth to apologise, and then realised that Kiba-kun didn’t mean it. He wasn’t admonishing her. He had been worried and, being a shinobi, he probably felt like he should not admit it. That was – nice.

Hinata smiled. Her teammates had been worried about her.

“We were going to avenge you, but it’s been impossible! We can’t get into the Hyuuga District, and your cousin barely shows his face in public except for team training-”

“He has become reticent after his verbal emasculation in the final stage of the examinations, courtesy of Naruto-san,” Shino-kun explained with a smirk.

“Oh.”

Naruto-kun… well, Naruto-kun would not be the boy he was – the boy she admired so – if he did not stand up for his friends against those who hurt them…

But Hinata hadn’t wanted this. Hadn’t wanted anything like this. She thought if people saw how strong Neji-nii-san was (so much stronger than her!), and acknowledged his strength, maybe things would get a little better for him. She didn’t have any way of undoing the Caged Bird Seal, but short of that she wanted him to have the same chances as if he were her full brother.

“Don’t make that face! He deserved everything he got and more!”

Hinata shook her head so rapidly that her muscles began to hurt. She sank deeper into the pillows and breathed for a moment, until the effects of the drugs dulled the discomfort again. “Please don’t judge him, Kiba-kun, Shino-kun. Neji-nii-san’s life – it is not a happy one. There was so much injustice, and some of it because of me-”

“If he blames you,” exclaimed Kiba-kun, “he’s not just a butthole – he’s a stupid butthole!”

Hinata flinched. Her sight blurred with tears. “K-kiba-k-kun-”

“Sorry, sorry,” Kiba-kun waved his hands, as if he could just fan the tension out of the room. “I won’t yell. I’ll try not to yell. He just makes me so mad!”

“Neji-san is a stronger fighter than you,” Shino said evenly, “but your fight did not prove his strength. The only thing he displayed was lack of control.”

“Yeah,” Kiba-kun agreed, “he was emoting all over the place, monologuing like a crazy, didn’t even concentrate, and when Naruto kicked his arse he fell apart like a complete loon. He’s whacko, Hinata!” He noticed he had raised his voice again and scowled. “Crap, sorry! Crap. Can I just…?”

Hinata did not understand what Kiba-kun’s gesture meant, but it was obvious that he needed whatever it was he had asked for. So she nodded.

He startled her by sitting on the bed and slowly, carefully winding his arm in between Hinata’s shoulders and the pillow. She found herself pulled against the solid, warm body of her teammate,
close enough to smell boy-sweat and dogs, but the smell was familiar rather than repellent. Still she
couldn’t help tensing.

“Am I- am I hurting you?”

“N-no…” she admitted. No one had ever held her like this – at least not that she remembered. Perhaps Okaa-san might have, but that would have been a very long time ago.

“It’s…” Kiba-kun huffed and tried to hide his reddening face. “It’s a pack thing. A… comfort sort of
thing. For dogs. And us. I mean the Clan – the Inuzuka Clan. We – we need physical contact.”

Hinata bit the inside of her cheek. It was quite enough that Shino-kun was laughing at Kiba-kun
unabashedly. Besides, now that she was becoming accustomed to the idea, the closeness and warmth
felt comforting to her, too.

“…yeah, makes sense,” Anko admitted. “You know I only ask for the pretty face ‘cause I’m wet for
the-“

“Anko-san!” Iruka hissed, and glanced at the keeper of the store they just entered.

The man’s eyes zeroed in on the second customer that walked through the door, discovered the
display of Anko’s plentiful assets and got stuck. He didn’t appear to even notice the third person
entering after her.

“I’ll give you a private show later, if you’d like,” Naruto whispered into her ear (although he had to
stand on his toes to get anywhere near, and Anko wasn’t very tall).

At times like these Iruka wished he could turn off his hearing.

“Yeah, we’re picking a weapon for you, not for Naruko-chan,” agreed Anko. “For her I’ve got a
very nice switch-“

Luckily, Anko quickly got distracted with all the sharp implements in Kamakura’s shop, while Iruka
made it a point to stay by Naruto’s side. He kept half an eye on the proprietor; so far Iruka hadn’t
detected any animosity, what with the lust that seemed to have completely turned off the man’s
higher cognitive functions.

A brief brainstorming session between the three of them proved that neither had any concrete idea
about what kind of weapon Naruto might like to start learning, so eventually it was decided that they
would just have a look around and maybe inspiration would strike.

Iruka personally suspected that Naruto would walk out with a chokuto or a kodachi, but he wasn’t
going to try and influence the boy’s decision.

“Sensei…?” Naruto said wonderingly, waking Iruka from the reverie.

The boy was standing in front of the display counter in the most shadowed corner of the shop. There
were weird bits and pieces scattered within the display, some of which Iruka couldn’t name. He
couldn’t even imagine how some of them worked.

And in the middle of that heap of steel and obsidian and glass lay the thing.

Naruto picked it up and put it on his hand. It fit almost perfectly – he would grow out of it in a year,
since it was designed for a woman’s hand, but perhaps the size could be adjusted as needed?

“Huh,” Iruka mused. Then he grinned. This was going to be good. “A cat paw, huh?”

Naruto’s horrified look made Iruka wish he had thought to take a camera with him. For a brief moment it seemed as though Naruto would rip off the neko-te and throw it as far away from himself as possible.

Then he proved that he could be rational even about his antipathies (not that Iruka truly doubted this, after Naruto managed to work mostly professionally with Sasuke, Sakura and Jiraiya-sama).

Naruto attempted to manipulate the neko-te, feeling how it handled, clicking the long claw-points together. Then he whined. “It’s perfect, Iruka-sensei! I would love that, but no self-respecting guy would use a cat-based weapon! How would I look my huntmates in the eye? Urgh!”

“So… it’s not a problem that it’s a kunoichi weapon?” inquired the shopkeeper, lured away from his Anko-inspired reverie by the vision of profit.

“Ehh? Why would it be?” Naruto blinked in perfect (and perfectly artificial) innocence. “It’s a weapon.” Then he narrowed his eyes, as though a suspicion just occurred to him. “Wait, are you one of those people?”

“What people?”

“Oh, boy. I think I need Anko-nee-san for this explanation-"

“Ah, no, that’s okay!” the shopkeeper assured him hastily, waving his hands, palms-out and smiling so widely his cheeks must have cramped. “I’ve changed my mind. You’ve convinced me – great, neko-te, sure, go for it, shinobi-san!”

“Wow,” Naruto muttered to Iruka, “a threat of Anko works even better than Rikku showing off his teeth…”

And how Iruka wished this peaceful, kind village hadn’t made it necessary for Naruto to use his ninken’s intimidating effect to be treated semi-fairly.

Naruto seemed to take it all with good humour, though. “He’s just scared ’cause Anko-nee wouldn’t even need a big, manly sword to skewer him.” He paused and then added: “And make him like it.”

Iruka suppressed a groan. Anko was creating a monster. He momentarily regretted that his professional persona was so demure; then he recalled that usually he wasn’t in the middle of political work on an insanely stressful level. He loved working with children – when he actually had the chance to work with children – and the self-censorship was well worth it.

Besides, in those halcyon times when his stress was down at the usual ‘moderately high’ level of the Academy, he hadn’t felt the need to vent so much.

He clasped his favourite ex-student’s shoulder. “I think you should take it, Naruto. With your taijutsu, that would be a devastating supplement.” He could already see it: gushing blood and guts spewing all around. Not exactly a nice or clean fighting style, but terribly, terribly effective.

And it was an old, traditional kunoichi weapon, barely even used anymore – obscure and vicious to Anko’s tastes, and immensely practical for Naruto’s undercover (almost universally female) personas.
Naruto, encouraged by Iruka’s approval, nodded. “Yeah, I think this is it.”
Team Spirit

Tsunade-sama’s term would officially start on the day of the Inauguration.

Iruka didn’t dare even guess how long it would take before she was in charge factually as well as nominally – he and Kakashi had been forced to take over the administration immediately and without any initial instruction, and he hoped to spare Godaime-sama the struggle. In any case, to avoid future contestations of authority, Iruka had to lay the preparations for his plans within the next two days. Three on the outside.

He spent thirteen hours straight drafting and approving assignments and missions, leaving the deadlines blank and feeling just a little bit like a fraud. None of what he did was technically illegal, but only by virtue of the near all-power of his position.

He put a practiced henohenomoheji on the last sheet, stamped it, bound all the papers together, put them into a blood-sealed box and took them home.

Then he went to place an order of a dozen carts’ worth of sake, because a good Hokage’s aide foresaw future problems and prevented them before they could impede the smooth running of the village.

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The one advantage of being the Acting Hokage was that Kakashi didn’t have to defend his pick of a team. He needed a team, of course – how else would he operate in the Fire-Wind territory while a war might break out any day?

“Why not Shikamaru, though?” asked Iruka, with that adorable wrinkle on his forehead that made Kakashi want to kiss him until the wrinkle smoothed out and he forgot what he was fretting about.

Kakashi could have just signed and stamped his own request, of course, but there were many and varied reasons to listen and answer to Iruka. Not the least of which was that a second opinion might uncover some gaps in his plan. Theoretically. So he presented his reasoning: “I am a tactical genius – I don’t need another one on my team. And he’s a Clan Heir. We only send those to the frontlines when we don’t like their parents. Or them.”

Iruka rolled his eyes. “Not a single diplomatic bone in your body.”

There was a reason why Iruka eventually agreed to switch off on the negotiations. Iruka also probably knew that Kakashi had made zero headway on purpose, to showcase his failure and thus get out of all future negotiations. It was a tactic that had served him well in the past, and he only needed to convince Tsunade, who didn’t know him well enough to see through his bullshit just yet.

“Genma,” Kakashi segued. Genma was the designated diplomatic type of the new Team Kakashi. They had to have one level-headed person on the team to do all the face-palming. “And I need a medic more than I need a woman-”

“Why not request a female medic?” Iruka pointed out logically.

“And anyway Naruto can be a better woman than most of the kunoichi I know.” Next to Anko, Tsume, Yoshino or Sakura, undercover-Naruto was a paragon of female grace. “Because Yakushi’s policy to make peacetime field assignments voluntary means there are none available.”
Iruka looked over the roster again. “What did you bribe Nishi-sensei with?”

“Chance of promotion. He’s qualified. If he successfully completes five B- to A-ranks, he’ll make tokujo.”

“And how will you swing that with Tsunade-sama in the office?” Iruka inquired. There was no hint of doubt, no accusation of manipulation – only curiosity.

Kakashi grinned under his mask. “I already did the paperwork. It’s all signed – pending five attached mission reports. Don’t look at me like that, sensei – he was up for that promotion years ago, just hates the hospital politics and couldn’t be bothered to suck up to Yakushi.”

Iruka sighed. “Fine. Take your stacked team of non-conformists. Just don’t start a war, please.” He looked worried.

There was no need for worry. Kakashi wasn’t his Father. Even if something he did sparked this barrel of gunpowder to blow, he wouldn’t kill himself over it.

“The objective is to prevent the war. And, if worse comes to worst, we’ll just take over Suna and annex Wind as well.” He blithely disregarded the presence of an entire country between Fire and Wind. Although, to tell the truth, he didn’t doubt that Rivers would welcome being turned into Fire’s province over the alternative at that point. No one liked their backyard randomly becoming a battlefield.

Besides, it wasn’t like Konoha couldn’t stomp Suna into the ground and dance around its flaming ruins. That’s what Suna got for tolerating a Kage who killed off his own best shinobi in fear of being usurped.

But, apparently, Konoha were the pathetic tree-huggers. Some people – even very powerful people – did not have even a passing acquaintance with logic.

Iruka just sighed at him again.

x

The last meeting of Team Seven did not start auspiciously.

Naruto was a little late, because he had gone for a run with his hunt beforehand; he had the lap around the inner side of the Wall timed down to the minute, but he had completely forgotten to account for Haku-chan’s short legs. They had to slow down for the puppy in the beginning; soon enough Haku got too tired to go any further, and Naruto carried him the rest of the way, but they didn’t make up for the initial delay.

He checked the time – it was just five minutes past, so there was no chance on earth of Kakashi-sensei being anywhere in the vicinity. Naruto was, however, treated to one of Sakura’s gentle admonishments.

“You’re late!”

Naruto tilted his head to the side. So did Juuji and Annai, copying him (for no other reason than because they had noticed it freaked people out – and he loved them a little bit more for it).

There was something wrong with this picture.

Then Sasuke, seated lotus-style at the foot of the bridge railing, smirked under his mess of a fringe,
and everything became clearer: Sakura must have taken his threat seriously and toned down the screeching.

Huh. Naruto didn’t think it would actually happen. But just this once a good thing came to the one who had been waiting.

“Saa,” Naruto said. “Had to save a puppy.”

“Liar!” This time the shout was louder, but it still fell short of ear-rending.

Naruto stared at her for a while and then mutely lifted the puppy in his arms as a solid proof that he was telling the truth. How had she not noticed Haku-chan? Haku-chan was the awesomest thing in sight! Granted, she might have been blinded by the Lamppost’s light, but-

“Are you usurping me, chuunin-kun?” Kakashi-sensei shunshined directly behind Naruto’s back and leaned over him, like a giant threatening to eat him. That was seriously impressive, because Naruto came up nearly to his biceps already.

Naruto had expected some killing intent to compound the effect, but Kakashi was looking at Haku-chan and, yeah, Dog-sensei probably knew how to treat puppies better than he knew how to treat human kids. No scaring them when they were little.

“You’re not even really the Hokage anymore,” Naruto dismissed the accusation. “What’s there to usurp?” As if he’d willingly take on the two ninja disasters!

He put the wiggling Haku on the ground and accepted a lick to his chin as his due.

Some dark magic must have hit them next. Sakura suddenly melted – no, not literally, more was the pity – fell to her knees, clasped her hands together and cooed. “Wow, what a pretty girl you are!”

Haku-chan bared his teeth and growled louder than anything that tiny had any right to. “’ma boy!”

Naruto held out for about five seconds and then just exploded into laughter, rolling on the ground and grasping at a stitch in his side. This was too much. Too much.

“H-haku’s first words!”

And if there were tears… What? There always were tears when you laughed that hard! There totally… totally were.

“Chuuunin,” Sasuke hissed from somewhere out of Naruto’s sight. “There is no justice in the world.”

Naruto rolled his eyes. Riiight, as if the inability to relax made ninja somehow better. Bull. Nobody needed more high-strung Kage-level emotional bombs walking around. But it was like Sasuke just somehow couldn’t understand, like he was literally incapable of understanding, that pathos was not the same thing as seriousness or sincerity.

“Then…” Sakura inquired, abandoning the attempts to pet the uncooperative puppy and standing to look imploringly at her teacher. “You’re really stepping down, Kakashi-sensei?”

“Is this a joke?” Sarutobi Asuma stared at the scroll in his hand as though he was hoping the kanji would spontaneously rearrange themselves. He looked about ready to pack his bags and return to the Fire Daimyo’s court.
Iruka, sitting behind the Missions Desk, blinked at him beatifically. “Everything seems to be in order, sensei. Is there a problem?”

Asuma-san stomped out of the room past a handful of bewildered onlookers. Iruka could hear him muttering somewhere outside: “I’d say there’s a fucking problem! If I find Hatake did this to me on purpose-”

Iruka felt a little guilty about implicating Kakashi, but he would make it up to him.

“Saa…” Kakashi rubbed the back of his head. Why was his scalp itching? Had he pissed off Iruka again or was it just the highest time to wash his hair? He was used to washing it every other day to get out all the blood and dirt; but lately there had been no blood and very little dirt. Administration was confusing. “I only kept the place going before someone qualified could take over.” Well, _Iruka_ had kept the place going; Kakashi had mostly just sat there and looked very attractive. And intimidating. And occasionally signed things.

“It’s exciting, though!” Sakura enthused. “We could say we were the Hokage’s students!”

Kakashi didn’t particularly think that being a Hokage’s student was anything to be proud of. Mostly it just meant your teacher barely had any time for you and then got himself heroically killed. But, oh well. People were proud of the strangest things.

“What happens now?” demanded Sasuke. “Are you reforming Team Seven?”

Not for all the quality porn on the continent.

Kakashi narrowed his eye in an approximation of a smile and shook his head. “Better! You’ll each get your very own team that you won’t have to share with the others. Won’t that be nice?”

“…no,” Sakura replied, shocked. “No, it won’t be. Sensei…?” She looked sideways at Sasuke.

The boy was watching Kakashi with a mixture of skepticism and cautious hope. “What’s the catch?”

Kakashi clapped his hands. “Sakura-chan only gets a temporary assignment for now. Team Eight’s kunoichi is on medical leave for at least another month. Kurenai-sensei will take you on in the meantime.”

It served Kurenai right for being a bitch about entering the kids into the Chuunin Exams. Just desserts. Kakashi was down with this solution, and his glee only grew when Sakura grimaced and muttered about _bugs_ and _Kiba_. At least – this he had to give her – she wasn’t so Sasuke-focused that she didn’t know who her teammates were going to be.

He was a little disappointed to see horror dawning in his other gennin’s eyes before he even started speaking, but he didn’t let it detract from this very pleasant experience. “Sasuke-kun, you are permanently assigned to Team Ten, since they are missing a mem-”

“With _Ino_?!” all three kids yelled at the same time.

“A flock of thrushes startled from a nearby tree and escaped in the direction of the forest.
“Ha!” Ino danced around Asuma-sensei and punched Chouji in the shoulder – not even that hard! he could stop whining like a baby and rubbing it already! – because he was being a complete downer, and this was great news! The greatest news!

Ino pirouetted on the spot and pointed her finger at her sensei, who was also being an absolute downer. “I told Forehead so! I win!”

Sakura’s face flushed so it was as pink as her hair, and then continued darkening until she looked like steam would start coming out of her nose and ears any moment now. She strangled a screech with a hand slammed over her mouth.

Sasuke looked more homicidal than usual. That was very, very homicidal. He came by it honestly, but it didn’t look healthy. Still, it could have been worse – at least he wasn’t contemplating suicide just yet.

And that was Naruto’s point. He couldn’t believe that anyone would be as stupid as to finally free Sasuke of Sakura only to put him on a team with Ino. It was like… like they wanted to torture him. And Naruto wasn’t even blowing it out of proportion. This was nasty.

Not even the Lamppost deserved that.


“Nobody but you hates cats, idiot!” Sakura yelled.

“-diles? There’s got to be something. Sasuke needs to acquire a summoning contract by tomor-”

“I don’t like cats either,” Dog-sensei nonchalantly pointed out.

“-row, and it’s got to be something that will make Ino keep her distance. So, what’s she hate? Or what’s she scared off? C’mon! Think!”

“Uh…” Sakura, catching onto his line of thought – and eager to sabotage Ino – frowned and contemplated. Then she brightened up and announced: “Large birds. Ideally raptors.”

A memory niggled. “Mizuki-bastard had a bird contract.” Before Naruto beat him to a pulp and left the remnants to the T&I. “His stuff probably went to his girlfriend. Iruka-sensei knows her. We could ask?”

Sasuke stared at Naruto as if he was seeing him for the first time in his life. And then he proved that something in him had broken completely when his new team assignment was announced, because he said: “Naruto… you’re my best friend.”

Chouji desolately stared into his half-full bag of chips. He had tried, because Asuma-sensei looked like he couldn’t deal with any more problems before he had smoked his way through two packets of cigarettes, but it was useless.

He couldn’t force himself to eat.

He missed Shika. It was childish of him, he knew, but they had always been together, and always
knew they would be on a team together, and it just hadn’t ever occurred to Chouji that they might get split up one day.

Ino had stopped being Ino, and became a monster fangirl again.

And tomorrow there would be Uchiha Sasuke on their team.

Chouji maybe wanted to cry a little, but he would save that for later, when he was at home in his room and nobody would see him. Maybe Shika would come visit. Chouji didn’t mind if Shika saw him cry.

It wasn’t like it would be the first time.

x

Kakashi couldn’t believe what he was seeing. Was this a dream? He pinched himself. Nah. Was it a genjutsu?

A kai didn’t change anything about the scene. Neither did peeking with the Sharingan.

Was it a delusion brought on by sitting too long in the Hokage’s chair? Implausible, but he wouldn’t discard that theory just yet.

Were his former students for the first time in their miserable short careers cooperating? As in, working together? As in, not arguing, sharing intelligence and resources, and pursuing a common objective?

…now?!

“Naruto-”

“Not now, sensei!” Naruto cut him off. “We’ve got a crisis here!”

“Yeah!” agreed Sakura-chan. “If that’s all, sensei, then thank-you-for-teaching-us-we’ll-see-you-around-bye-”

And they were gone, running toward the village in search of Iruka and – presumably – Tsubaki-san.

Kakashi shook his head. “So, Naruto-kun doesn’t want to know his new assignment? Saa.”

The canine co-leader of Naruto’s hunt, who up until now sat nearly unnoticeable in the shadow of a hazel bush, ambled forward until he stopped just short of biting distance of Kakashi. He eyed the scroll in Kakashi’s hand. “I’ll take that, sensei, and make sure he’s on time for the meet and greet. This way you’ll get to see his face when he finds out.”

He was gone before Kakashi figured out what it was about the eldest of Naruto’s ninken that niggled at his memory.
“Hold it right there!” Tsunade yelled, and prepared to jump out of the window after the fleeing man.

Shockingly, Umino chose that moment to act like he was a diligent shinobi prepared to obey his Hokage’s orders. Tsunade didn’t buy this act for a second, but at least she didn’t have to go chasing after him over the rooftops.

“Yes, Hokage-sama?” Umino asked politely.

“Don’t even think about it,” she grumbled, throwing herself into the Hokage’s chair. As her arse hit the upholstery it occurred to her that she should have checked for tags – and possibly for tacks, too. She primed her chakra-

Nothing happened.

Umino’s face was trying to convince her that butter wouldn’t melt in his mouth.

Yeah, right. She hadn’t been born yesterday.

“You thought you’d dump this whole mess in my lap and go back to teaching brats?” she said. “Not on your life.” She didn’t have the slightest doubt that he and Hatake had both assigned themselves exactly where they wanted to be. For any other combination of ninja this would worry her greatly, and she would have ensured that the assignments were scrutinised very closely indeed.

Hatake and Umino, however, had the frightening combination of great power, great acumen, and an utter lack of ambition. Disgraceful, she had heard it said. Good for them, she thought.

She was perfectly fine with playing along – after they had cleaned up this rubbish heap.

“Uhm, Hokage-sama,” said Umino, all bemused deference, “I am only a chuunin; I work at the Shinobi Academy and man the Missions Desk, and I do try to help with the Tower administration whenever possible, but-”

“Do I look like that much of a sucker, kid?”

The chuunin fell quiet. He went on pretending to be befuddled. He wasn’t very good at pretending to be befuddled. Too shrewd, this one.

“You’re not leaving your post as the Hokage’s aide until the negotiations with Oto are concluded – to our satisfaction – and I’m reassured that Suna won’t suicidally attack us.”

Umino seemed to hesitate. Then he reached into the outbox on her desk – still filled with the documents processed by Hatake (or, more likely, by Umino himself – Hatake didn’t strike Tsunade as the type of ninja inclined to sit at a desk and do his paperwork) – and pulled out two scrolls. He handed them over to her.

Tsunade skimmed them both. The first was the official release of Umino Iruka from his duties as the aide to the Hokage pending the signing of a contract with the representatives of the Land of Rice Fields. The other was Hatake’s new assignment, worded vaguely enough to stand up to scrutiny, but
in the end amounting to patrol and peace-keeping in Wind’s borderlands.

Umino waited until Tsunade looked up at him before he answered her unasked question: “It’s our work. We’re not going to leave it unfinished.”

Naruto came with Sakura and Sasuke to see Iruka-sensei at the Missions Desk – he seemed to be just dropping in on his way elsewhere, so they were lucky to catch him – but once sensei gave them directions – after he had thoroughly interrogated them – Naruto decided that he had done his part.

He didn’t want to go see Tsubaki-san, and he was pretty sure she wouldn’t have wanted to see him. It really bothered him when Iruka-sensei talked about her, because she seemed like a nice person who got her heart broken by Mizuki-bastard.

And a little by Naruto, too, ‘cause Naruto was the one who had exposed Mizuki-bastard’s bastardness and then kicked the stuffing out of him. And even though he was a bastard, she probably loved him. If she didn’t hate Naruto outright, she definitely at least resented him.

So Naruto went to the Hospital instead.

“Hokage-sama has been released,” said the woman behind the reception counter when she saw him come in.

Naruto guessed that he could have come in under a Henge if he wanted to reduce the risk of being turned away for being himself, but if he did *everything* under a disguise, he might as well stop being Naruto. He needed to make himself be seen as the person he was if he was to be accepted one day.

Besides, the Hospital was full of medics, and the better medics could tell who he was by his chakra. Then he would be made, and they’d think he was in disguise because he wanted to do something underhanded, like prank the Hospital.

He wouldn’t do that. That was not right. If he decided to prank any of the medics, he would catch them off shift. And he’d only decide to do something like that if they really, really deserved it.

“Yeah, like, three weeks ago,” he told the woman, who apparently thought he didn’t have any friends, and wouldn’t visit anybody at the hospital.

Naruto hadn’t seen the Old Man in the meantime, ‘cause he was ‘recuperating’ at his Clan House, and they weren’t letting anybody in. Except the ANBU guards and Tsunade and Iruka-sensei. But Iruka-sensei said that Tsunade had helped the Old Man last week, and he was a lot better now.

So, hopefully Naruto would get to visit him soon.

First this, though. He glared at the receptionist, who was glaring at him. They both kept glaring for a while, and then-

“Excuse me,” said a long-suffering voice from behind Naruto. “You are blocking the entrance.”

Naruto turned. “It’s Goat Boy! Hi, Goat Boy!”

Hyuuga Neji’s long-suffering tone was matched by a long-suffering expression. “I would prefer if you didn’t call me that, Uzumaki.”

“Yeah, but!” Naruto gestured expansively. “But you see like three hundred and sixty degrees, and
goats see almost three hundred and sixty degrees, so it makes sense, right? You should be proud of your skills, Goat Boy!”

Those weird pupil-less eyes blinked at Naruto. Hyuuga said, dryly: “Didn’t you say something about me being too proud and needing to learn humbleness? I may recall a direct quote-”

“Yeah, but you’re all better now, aren’t you? So you can start learning to be proud of your skills without being a complete jerk about it. Gambatte yo-ttebayo!” Naruto showed him two thumbs-up – and it was only ‘cause Hyuuga was standing too close that he had to jerk back to avoid being punched in the jaw by Naruto’s thumb-up fists.

“Out!” exclaimed the receptionist. “Get lost, Uzumaki-”

“Hey, it’s Naruto!” Kiba called out from the stairs. “We came to see who was causing so much ruckus – should have figured it’d be you!”

“Indeed,” said Shino, appearing by Kiba’s side.

“C’mon!” Kiba waved Naruto over. “I’ll take you to see Hinata – you’re here for her, right? You’re gonna make her day!”

“Wait a minute-” The receptionist tried to protest, but was collectively ignored.

Hyuuga followed quietly in Naruto’s wake, only for a second Shino to appear in front of him and block the hallway. The clone had lines of tiny black insects migrating from the sleeves of the genjutsu-jacket to its genjutsu face, where they seemed to disappear inside through the mouth.

It was freaky.

Naruto turned just in time to see Hyuuga activate the Byakugan. He readied himself for a fight although, to be honest, he didn’t have a clue what he would do if one started. Kiba and Shino were right to protect their teammate after what had happened.

Hyuuga though – he was messed up. Getting a little better, maybe, but he needed all the help he could get.

Nobody attacked in the end. After a while of mounting tension Hyuuga simply spun, hitting Shino’s clone in the genjutsu-face with his hair, and walked away.

x

“Hey, Hinata, look who we found blocking the hallways!” Kiba-kun called out, swaggering through the door.

Hinata took a deep breath and forced herself to greet the visit with a smile.

The visitors were being very kind to her, and she didn’t want them to think she wasn’t grateful, but it was a little bit difficult. Shino-kun and Kiba-kun had been keeping her company for almost an hour already, and she felt tired and achy, and in truth wanted quite desperately to close her eyes and sleep.

And then-

Naruto-kun came in after Kiba-kun.

Hinata felt her pained smile stretch into one far more genuine. She couldn’t believe he had come here to see her. In fact, it was far more likely that she was already asleep and having a nice dream.
“H-hello, N-naruto-kun…” she whispered. Her cheeks were hot.

“Hey, Hinata,” he replied, waving a little. “Good to see you. Heard Tsunade came by. She give you any good news?”

“Ano… that is…”

“Hokage-sama gave Hinata a better prognosis,” Shino-kun offered. “It was a great relief.”

“Cool!” Naruto-kun agreed. “I guess for a drunken deserter, she’s not so bad.” His face twisted briefly, but whatever was making him angry was quickly pushed away, and he directed another of his brave, bright smiles at her. “I’m glad you’re gonna get better. Next time you’ll kick Goat Boy’s butt! Believe it!”

“Goat Boy!” Kiba-kun repeated delightedly and started snickering.

The corner of Shino-kun’s mouth lifted, too.

Naruto-kun rolled his eyes. “It’s ‘cause he sees three hundred and sixty degrees.”

That, Hinata guessed, made herself the Goat Girl. Also, a lot more funny, it made her Father the Goat Man. It was probably the drugs, but she giggled at the idea of Father’s face if he ever found out.

“So,” Naruto-kun continued, ignoring the amusement of all the Team Eight members, “I just wanted to say good luck and if you need anything, tell me. Or send one of these guys to tell me.” He scratched behind Akamaru-kun’s ears to include him in ‘these guys’.

Hinata’s eyes widened. Bolstered by the chemicals in her bloodstream, she said: “There is something.” She felt the blush return, but she wasn’t going to let embarrassment paralyse her. Not this time. “Shino-kun, Kiba-kun, Akamaru-kun, would you excuse us?”

Her teammates exchanged looks. Kiba-kun elbowed Shino-kun in the side; Akamaru-kun headbutted Naruto-kun’s leg. The two boys and the ninken ambled out of the room, leaving a clueless Naruto-kun behind. Hinata could see Kiba-kun’s lips soundlessly forming the word ‘confession’.

The door snicked shut.

Naruto-kun took a step closer to Hinata’s bed and scratched at the back of his neck. “Uh, Hinata…”

Hinata pulled a folded-up piece of paper from under her pillow and extended her hand to him (that took far more energy than it had any right to).

Naruto-kun hesitantly took it.

Hinata closed her eyes in relief and exhaustion. “Please,” she said, “please, Naruto-kun, give that to Neji-nii-san.”

When he promised he would, she felt a tear escape from under her eyelid. She didn’t see him leave; by the time he did she was already asleep.

Sakura was beginning to get worried.

Tsubaki-san had surprised her by not needing very much persuasion to part with the summoning
scroll. Usually such things were very precious to people, but Tsubaki-san just gave it to them after listening to their explanations and begging – well, Sakura’s begging, since it wouldn’t be right for Sasuke-kun to act like that… although he did say ‘please’ and sounded like he meant it.

Sasuke-kun must really dislike Ino, Sakura thought, and usually that would have been followed by a happy exclamation from that nasty part inside her that knew Ino’s loss was Sakura’s victory. But. But Sakura could only remain willfully blind for so long.

Sasuke-kun had been happy to be rid of the rest of Team Seven (until he learnt he would be assigned to Team Ten). Sakura hadn’t won anything. Ironically, this was exactly like the Chuunin Exams: Sakura and Ino tied. In loss.

“They’re…” Sakura tried. “They’re very majestic birds.”

Sasuke-kun continued blankly staring at the contract.

Sakura wasn’t sure, but she guessed he was probably weighing the option of facing Ino without any deterrent against the option of spending the rest of his career with… uh… not quite unorthodox summons, but certainly not the kind of dignified and awe-striking summons people expected when they thought of the last member of the great Uchiha Clan.

“That man…” Sasuke muttered, barely audibly, so he was probably not talking to Sakura. “…summons crows.”

Maybe we did turn him off of women? pointed out inner Sakura.

Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! the real Sakura thought at the voice in her head.

“Uh…” Sakura wasn’t sure what to do with this. She decided to say the safest thing she could think of: “People have lots of different summons. Tsunade-sama has got slugs, and the Yondaime had toads, and-”

“Hey, guys!” Naruto called out. A second later he landed in a crouch next to them. “Oh, you got it. Great! What’s with the long faces?”

Sasuke-kun glared. This didn’t affect Naruto at all. He must have been really used to it. In fact, Naruto took the glare as an invitation to lean over Sasuke-kun’s shoulder and read the contract.

“That’s what you’re angsting about?” He huffed and rolled his eyes.

Sakura wanted to punch him.

That would be satisfying, but wouldn’t change the fact that he’s right, pointed out inner Sakura. Hey, if Sasuke-kun doesn’t want the contract, let’s sign it ourselves, shannaro!

Sakura agreed. When would she have another chance like this?

“Hey, bastard,” said Naruto, “at least it’s not flamingoes, right?”

Sasuke-kun looked up then, frowning in contemplation. Then he turned to Sakura and his eyes climbed up past her face – to her hair. He smirked. “You’re right, idiot.”

Sakura considered – for just a moment, and not very seriously – dyeing her hair.

Sod that! exclaimed her inner self. Time to make up some witty quips about pelicans!
She was sure Naruto would help (between the gular pouches, long bills and Sasuke-kun’s haircut, there was sure to be a wealth of punchlines there). Naruto had a long, long practice making fun of Sasuke-kun – he might as well put it to a good use.

It was better to laugh. She certainly wasn’t going to cry. Wasn’t. Honestly.

*Next time Sasuke-kun needs something, we’re sure as hell not doing his begging for him!*

x

“Tadaima,” Sasuke said to the empty room of the empty house in the empty Compound.

He cooked pasta for dinner and sat down at the kitchen table to eat it, attention half on the scroll placed at the empty space opposite him.

Of the three of the former Team Seven members, Naruto was the only one who had signed a summoning contract.

Sasuke considered swallowing his pride and asking the menace how he should go about it, but then he remembered Naruto’s retelling of the occasion, and decided that where a toddler finger-painting over a contract and then having an uncontrolled burst of chakra accompanying a passed wind could be considered ‘cute’ by a certain subset of summons, it was unlikely to work for a thirteen-year-old (still) gennin.

Another alternative was seeking out a ninja who had acquired a summoning contract in a more realistic scenario. However, that carried the risk of said ninja simply taking the contract away from Sasuke, and he would rather fight a house-sized pelican than a jounin (their sad excuse for a jounin sensei had taught him at least that much).

Among other things, it carried a lesser chance of being dragged off to Torture and Interrogation, or being deactivated as a shinobi for psychological reasons.

He knew that the results of his latest evaluation had made the gossip rounds.

It couldn’t be that difficult, surely? His Sharingan had copied the jutsu itself from Kakashi. A few seals, a flow of chakra – directed through the contract the first time – and then presumably some vicious negotiation before they conceded to the signing. He could do this.

He walked out to the courtyard and spread the scroll in front of him. The sun was setting, colouring the sky orange and yellow, almost as though the Fire Country were actually on fire. The din of the village was so far away that it remained at the very edge of perceptibility.

At least it’s not *flamingoes*, he thought facetiously. And then he thought honestly: at least it’s not *crows*.

*“Kuchiyose no Jutsu!”*

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Chapter End Notes

I wanted to do it. I was considering so hard giving Sasuke actual flamingo summons, because that would be so hilarious, but in the end it seemed too far on the crack side. So he’s got pelicans, and they’re going to rock.
The Inauguration itself was half a day spent in preparations and then half-an-hour performance for the public. Iruka begged off of the afterparty, came home and face-planted into their bed. Kakashi was already there, fast asleep.

It occurred to Iruka that he had seen Kakashi follow the procession to the Sarutobi Clan House, where the afterparty was being hosted. He sighed. What he would give for the chakra reserves to create lasting shadow clones…

x

The inauguration-thingy meant that most ninja in Konoha got the day off. Sunface did the only logical and right thing: he summoned Juuji and his little sister and spent the afternoon with them, like they used to when they were puppies. He spent a lot of time ranting about the new Hokage and describing the gathering, so Juuji mostly tuned him out and focused on the tracking exercise.

The Flea had been easy to find: at home, with her family. No challenge at all.

The Lamppost was harder, but only by virtue of being way out in the forest. They did find him in the end, although what they saw was nothing at all like what Juuji had imagined.

Sasuke was… fishing.

Uchiha Sasuke. The Lamppost. The guy who turned up his nose at training with his teammates, participated in missions only under implicit threats from Dog-sensei, and disdained any non-killing-related activities, was fishing. Although, that counted as killing, right?

No, wait, maybe this made perfect sense.

Juuji hunkered down in the grass to watch. Annai did the same on Naruto’s other side, and eventually Naruto too lay on his belly, pillowed his head on his forepaws, and settled down to observe.

Sasuke was standing thigh-deep in the brook, bent forwards, with his hands in the water. Every once in a while he grabbed. About half the time he pulled out a fish and offered it for inspection to a large gray-and-white bird. The bird stood on a rock jutting out of the water, so it had to lean down to Sasuke’s raised hands for each inspection.

It ate about every third fish. The rest Sasuke let go.

When Sasuke lunged but came up empty-handed, there was some grumbling and bristling. Prissy kitten didn’t much like water, apparently – ha! Couldn’t have gotten better summons, short of actual fish.

“I could grab his shirt,” Annai suggested, nodding toward the distant rock where Sasuke had left most of his gear bundled up in his short-sleeved wearable Uchiwa flag. “Let him walk home like that.”

Naruto looked like he was seriously considering this option, but eventually shook his head. “Nah. Any fangirls he might pass by would explode, and we shouldn’t kill civilians. Especially not our own civilians.”
Juuji critically squinted at the long, shapeless body with worm-like white skin, the pathetic tuft of black hair on its head wet and plastered to its neck, and a pair of tiny – also white – soaked shorts clinging to its middle. “He’s not *that* disgusting?” he opined.

Naruto snorted. “That’s a matter of opinion.”

“Ne, Naruto,” Annai inquired, getting bored now that her prank idea had been shot down, “why are we even watching him?”

That was a good question.

“cause I wanted to know how he’s getting along with his new summons—”

The big bird laughed loudly, snapping its long beak. Sasuke, in a fit of pique, threw his latest fish into the water hard enough to at least stun, if not outright kill it.

“Then you do it if you’re so smart!” yelled worm-boy.

The bird spread its wings, suddenly looking more like a stork than an awkward duck, and bopped the boy on the head with its beak. “Is that a way to speak to a noble and skilled hunter, little chick? Huh? Is that?”

“I haven’t seen you hunt anything yet-!” Sasuke retorted, visibly biting down on the automatic insult in the end there.

For that he received another bop.

“Ouch,” Naruto muttered, cringing in sympathy. “Looks at least as hard as Sakura’s hits.”

There was one thing Juuji honestly didn’t understand about this scene. He had thought he had the Lamppost figured out, and that guy would have showed any bird the bird if he thought it was getting uppity at him. “Why is he going along with that?”

Naruto mused on this topic for a while, and eventually decided: “I think Sasuke’s finally met someone who’s a bigger butthole than him. Basically, he’s impressed.”

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“Umino, a word!” Tsunade-sama snapped, striding past him in the corridor of the Hokage Tower.

Iruka had been about to take his typical three-minute break for lunch. He suppressed a sigh and spun on his heel. It was to be another day survived on field rations. Funny how negotiations in the centre of a ninja village resembled warfare in the trenches in some small ways.

He entered the Hokage’s office hoping that his stomach wouldn’t embarrass him and growl at his leader. If only he could stop thinking about food—

“Sit!” Tsunade-sama ordered him.

Another Tsunade-sama landed on the windowsill and without a word dropped a container into Iruka’s lap. Its heavenly smell prompted the dreaded growl of his stomach.

“I see the mutt’s point,” said the first Tsunade-sama. “Next time send someone for food, Umino. You’ve still got authority around here – I shouldn’t be accosted by somebody’s ninken claiming that you’re about to keel over from hunger.”
Iruka would have apologised, but she didn’t give him a chance.

“My advisors,” said the second Tsunade-sama, who was probably the shadow clone, “have completed the dossier you will need for successful negotiations. Eat and listen; I will give you a crash-course.”

Iruka ate his inarizushi – probably strategically picked as the kind of food that didn’t require much focus, and wouldn’t spill all over the paperwork – and listened to the explanations. For being a multi-level negotiation strategy, it was really very straightforward and excellently prepared. Obviously, Tsunade-sama’s advisors had put a lot of effort into it.

There were initial demands outlined, with notes for Iruka personally so he understood the background and relative importance of each one of them. There were concessions which could be made, and points on which he wasn’t allowed to compromise.

“Correct me if I am wrong, Hokage-sama,” he ventured, “but aren’t trade agreements within the purview of the Council?”

“Yes, Umino, but it’s all a technicality. And, since the war technically hasn’t ended until the treaties are signed, this is all a matter for war council and, congratulations, you are my appointed war councilor.”

Iruka knew that there was no point to arguing. He turned over a page and read another set of strongly worded recommendations.

It was clear as day that at least one of the Hokage’s advisors had extensive knowledge of the Land of Rice Fields – and just as clear that they were not nearly as well-informed about the Land of Fire. Perhaps Iruka had been wrong. Perhaps Jiraiya-sama had become Tsunade-sama’s Shadow.

In any case, he had his stomach and his hands full, and he finally saw his freedom from politics looming on the horizon, so he decided not to stick his nose into Godaime-sama’s business and let an overabundance of sensitive knowledge drag him back into the mire.

x

Sakura should have expected it, but it still came as a shock when her new sensei turned up to the team meeting three minutes early. It was arcane. It threw her off her stride.

“Good morning everyone!” Kurenai-sensei said with a smile. A genuine smile. Or, at least, a genuine-looking smile.

Sakura felt an indescribable yet distinct wrongness about this situation.

“Kai?” she tried half-heartedly.

Her new teammates stared at her as though she was the weird one.

That’s because you are the weird one, inner Sakura informed her mercilessly. What, you thought you came out of Team Seven well-adjusted?

You shut up! Sakura told herself, and thus further confirmed Inner’s point.

“Ah, good initiative, Sakura-chan,” said Kurenai-sensei, still smiling that benevolent, supportive smile. There was not the slightest hint of censure or sarcasm in it. “Genjutsu at unexpected times is a part of our training, due to my own expertise in illusions, but I would not throw you into the deep
end of the pool right off the bat. We want to welcome you to the team properly, before we start on anything difficult.”

Is she kidding, deadpanned Inner.

Sakura wanted to defend her future sensei, but the only valid defence of this monologue that occurred to her was the slight chance that it might have been a double-bluff.

“Well!” she repeated with a little more panache.

Nothing changed.

Kiba and Shino looked at one another (although how that worked with Shino’s sunglasses Sakura had no idea) and then they and Akamaru took a synchronised half-step backwards, as though Sakura was contagious.

I’ll make them eat their sandals, Shannaro!

“So, uhm…” said Kurenai-sensei, smile slipping just a little, and, although it didn’t show on her face, Sakura had a suspicion that she was embarrassed. For Sakura. “We may know each other’s names, but let’s start with some nice introductions anyway, how does that sound?”

Sakura’s eyes slid down over the jounin’s slinky dress to the woman’s feet.

She was also wearing sandals.

It’s a plan.

Sasuke sat lotus-style in the shade of an oak, hands clenched in his lap, doing his best not to quiver with trepidation and weariness.

It had been a while since he had exhausted himself in training so much that two meals and a night’s sleep had not regenerated him sufficiently. But Asuka was a harsh taskmaster – harsher even than Sasuke’s Father had been, once, a long time ago.

He dreaded the hours of waiting; he knew his mind would cycle, replaying yesterday over and over until he would want to just beat something into the ground to get away from the noise and take refuge in the oblivion of physical pain.

The summoning could have gone better. Asuka’s ‘What, you thought you’d just order me about? Dream on, egg-yolk,’ still echoed in his ears and made him flush with embarrassment.

But it could have gone far, far worse. Asuka only made a cursory round of the decrepit, empty Uchiha Compound before she decided that Sasuke’s circumstances were unacceptable (yes, she managed to glean this after ten minutes, as opposed to the whole fucking village that somehow missed this fact for almost seven fucking years!) and decided to take over Sasuke’s life.

He had tried to protest… but her hits were swift, her bill hard, and she had no compunctions about committing violence upon him.

“Sasuke-kuuuun!” echoed through the training fields.

Sasuke instinctively kawarimi’d with the nearest useful object. When he opened his eyes, Ino was sprawled on the grass and hugging a rotten log.
He hoped it was full or worms.

Ino squealed, jumped to her feet, kicked the log away (it broke into two pieces, which barely rolled over) and frantically tried to clean her top.

So, Sasuke thought, there would not be hours for his mind to torture him. Instead, there was a blonde ninja harpy to torture him. Had he thought Sakura was bad? Well, Sakura was bad.

Ino was just-

“Sasuke-kun, so cruel!” she exclaimed. “And I came earlier just so I could meet you first, and welcome you to our team and ask you-”

“What do you mean earlier?” Sasuke cut in. It was quarter to eight. He had been here for forty-five minutes already. Alone. At least with Kakashi, the idiot and the useless baggage had the basic ability to come on time and share the resentment.

“Meeting’s at ten, Sasuke-kun!” Ino informed him perkily. “The guys usually come between ten and half past, but I just knew that Sasuke-kun wasn’t the type to half-ass anything, and would come early! So I didn’t want you to wait here all alone so I’m to keep you company!”

Sasuke was going to kill Kakashi. Well, he was first going to make Kakashi teach him the Shunshin, then the Chidori, and only then kill him.

Because if he knew the Shunshin, he would have been able to shunshin out of this situation.

And if he knew the Chidori, there wouldn’t be a situation anymore.

As it were, Sasuke jumped up into the branches of the oak and scrabbled as fast as he could.

He’d come back in three hours.

X

“Hey!” said a voice that recently featured in his nightmares.

“Uzumaki-san,” Neji replied. He tensed against his will. He knew Uzumaki would not seek him out for any nefarious purpose, but his body still remembered the pain inflicted upon it by this boy. Worse, he only had to look at the flak jacket over Uzumaki’s orange t-shirt to flash back to those agonising words.

Neji would not cringe, even though he wished to.

Uzumaki was smiling at him. That was its own kind of humiliation.

“Can I help you?” Neji asked with as little emotion as possible. “Gai-sensei is-”

“Busy – I could tell,” Uzumaki cut in. “I was looking for you, actually, and I found you by following the yelling.”

If one listened closely, the exclamations of ‘Lee!’ and ‘Gai-sensei!’ could still be heard in the distance.

Neji viciously suppressed a sigh. One day soon, he was sure, Tenten would deign to speak to him again. Sadly, she gave him the condition that he must apologise to Hinata first, and although Neji honestly wished to tender an apology for his conduct regardless of his teammate’s prompting, it was
more difficult than he could have imagined. Between Inuzuka Kiba, Aburame Shino and, oddly enough, his Great Aunt Himawari (who was a medic at the Hospital, and always seemed to know within a minute whenever Neji darkened its doorstep), Neji had not yet managed to get within earshot of Hinata-sama.

“I’ve got something for you,” said Uzumaki and extended his hand, holding out an envelope.

Neji activated his Byakugan and ascertained that it was not a seal with some sort of ‘humorous’ effect, but an actual letter, written in Hinata-sama’s handwriting. He eagerly snatched it from Uzumaki’s hand and nearly ripped it in the haste to unfold it.

“If you want to write back to her,” Uzumaki said, although Neji barely heard it, focused as he was on his cousin’s words, “just find me. I’ll play messenger. See you ‘round, Goat Boy.”

When Neji raised his head again, fighting the swell of emotion and wishing to thank Uzumaki, the boy was already gone.

X

This, Sasuke thought, staring at the smoker sprawled on the grass, was the Sandaime Hokage’s son, formerly one of the Twelve Fire Guardians. While under Kakashi’s – for a lack of a better word – tutelage, Sasuke had occasionally imagined what he might have achieved, had he been assigned to a jounin that did not deliberately masquerade as a clown.

He knew for a fact that there were such jounin.

Unfortunately, it seemed like someone somewhere high up hated him, and made it a point to try and get Sasuke to regret ever tying on a hitai-ate.

“Yo,” said Asuma without opening his eyes. He blew out a cloud of smoke.

Sasuke nodded in his direction.

“And you’re not even that late.” The man chuckled. “Guess Kakashi must not have rubbed off on you yet.”

Sasuke blamed the double entendre that occurred to him entirely on Sakura, and proceeded to pretend he hadn’t heard anything. If Asuma thought he was funny, that was his personal problem, and Sasuke was in no way obligated to disabuse him of his delusions.

“Sasuke-kun!” Ino shouted – predictably.

Sasuke kawarimi’d. Just in time. He dropped down from the canopy of the tree where he had landed, and tried to approach the team from a different direction. At this point, the Akimichi seemed like the lesser evil.

“Yeah, uhm, hi,” said the Akimichi. “Sorry about Ino. But we can’t actually do anything about her. We tried…” The look in his eyes spoke of a childhood filled with a bossy Yamanaka girl.

Sasuke felt a stirring of pity, but it didn’t last long, because here Ino came again.

Since Asuma didn’t look like he would deign to move, presumably counting on the gennin to settle their disputes between themselves, Sasuke assumed the responsibility for protecting himself.

“Katon: Goukakyuu no Jutsu!”
Ino yelped and dodged. Mostly. About a third of her ponytail was burnt off, filling the air with stink that beat out even Asuma’s tobacco.

Sasuke felt his lips stretching in something approximating a smile.

Ino cried out, and amongst litany’s about her ‘poor beautiful hair’ inspected the damage. It wasn’t all that dramatic in Sasuke’s opinion, but he wouldn’t have minded putting the fear of Uchiha into the fangirl. Anything, if it got her to leave him alone.

“Oh, Sasuke,” said Akimichi, “I respected you… you know, as a shinobi… I’m sure the funeral will be nice.”

Ino looked up from her hair. Something strange happened to her face; her features twisted, and she pulled out a sai. Sasuke had never before seen her use anything but Academy standard weaponry, and none of it had ever been directed at him.

“You don’t need the use of all your limbs to make a good husband,” Ino opined in a conversational tone.

Sasuke had initially intended to keep his summoning contract in reserve for if Ino ever became more intolerable. He had failed to account for the fact that intolerability was very difficult to measure once the subject reached level ‘grounds for justifiable homicide’, and Ino had self-assuredly passed that mark already back in the Academy.

Sasuke had not expected to fear for the continued use of his extremities.

Shinobi had to know when to take a step back and call in reinforcements.

“Kuchiyose no Jutsu!”

The following fight was short, mostly one-sided, and ended when Asuma’s shadow clone grabbed Ino and pulled her away into relative safety.

The real Asuma moved around the training ground and put out fires.

Akimichi was still sitting on his rock, eating his chips. He looked like it would take far more than intra-team murder attempts and point-blank explosions to shake him out of his apathy.

Sasuke was done. He knew he was done. It was going to be another psych eval for him, and then either enforced retirement or aggressive ‘reeducation’ by way of the shadier ANBU detachments. These were his last days of freedom.

He needed to get out while there was still a chance.

Asuka landed on his outstretched arm (and nearly sent him to his knees). “What does the female want from you?”

“…mate,” Sasuke grumbled. He had hoped that the rage at harming her hair might have squashed the fangirlism, but it appeared that Ino was made of the same mold as Sakura.

“A female pursuing a male?” Asuka scornfully clacked her bill. “Has she no pride?! Is she even old enough to lay eggs?”

“We’re mammals.” Sasuke wasn’t sure what happened to his life that this was a sentence he had already said more than once, and could foresee himself repeating in the future. Often. “And not
really.”

If there was a topic Sasuke didn’t want to breach with his overbearing summon, it was the technicalities of human reproduction. He had enough nightmares about screeching women stalking him through the darkened, rotting hallways of the Uchiha Compound as was.

“Right.” Asuka fluffed up her feathers. “I’ve heard some mammals mate for life. So unnatural.”

Sasuke chose to refrain from mentioning swans.
If it weren’t for his nose, Naruto might have had trouble finding Iruka-sensei. He ran along the roofs on the lookout for the typical chuunin uniform and the ponytail, but when his nose alerted him to Iruka-sensei’s presence, there was no flak jacket in sight.

There was, at least, still the ponytail.

Iruka-sensei was wearing battle armor again, just like he had after the fight against Orochimaru when Old Man Hokage nearly died and Kakashi-sensei had had to temporarily become Hokage. For a moment Naruto got scared that something horrible had happened again – was a war starting for real? He knew that everybody was worried that there would be a war.

But, no, Iruka-sensei seemed too calm, and nobody else was panicking either, so there must have been something different going on. Unfortunately, Iruka-sensei sat down at a table that was already occupied by Jiraiya, and started a conversation.

Naruto did his best to act professional and not let his grudge get in the way while he was working (both Kana-san and Iruka-sensei said they were proud of him), but he wasn’t going to spend his off-duty time with the guy who should have been his Godfather. Besides, Kana-san’s opinion of Jiraiya mostly matched Naruto’s, and Iruka-sensei had said that he had his own grudge against the Toad Sage.

Which made the conversation going on below in the restaurant’s summer garden all the more interesting.

Naruto edged closer to the eaves.

“No,” Iruka-sensei said definitively. “No, I’m not going on another mission outside the village. Sarutobi-sama forbade it for a reason.”

Jiraiya snorted into his nearly empty coffee cup. “Ah. Did you finally find out how many people in Konoha want you dead?” He chuckled, as though threats to Iruka-sensei’s life were somehow funny. “You’ll get used to it, Itoshii-kun.”

‘Itoshii-kun’? Naruto wanted to bleach his brain and slap his hands over his ears and un-read Ero Ero Paradigm. He dearly wished wouldn’t have understood the nickname. Oh, why had Anko-nee done this to him? She was evil. Evil.

He resolved to breathe through this terrible shock and later, once he had overcome the trauma, tease Iruka-sensei relentlessly.

Right after he had pranked Jiraiya to the next week for laughing at the idea of Iruka-sensei in danger.

“This is the only place in Konoha that makes decent coffee,” mused the old man, before he settled the empty cup on the saucer with a deliberate clink. “If you are not offering your own contributions, boy, then who-”

Iruka-sensei stood and in the nick of time side-stepped a waitress that had nearly backed into him, arms loaded with four huge plates of colourful food. She was kinda amazing to watch. Naruto doubted that he would be able to carry so much food without upending all the plates over the sitting customers, and he was a trained ninja.
“With all due respect, Jiraiya-sama,” Iruka-sensei said so quietly that Naruto barely heard the words, “this is not a discussion for a public venue. There are more ears listening than we are aware of.”

Jiraiya looked up – but not to the place where Naruto was squatting. He glanced to the next house, to a roof that looked more like a piece of blooming jungle, except that it bristled with radio antennas sticking out from all the green. “Of that I am absolutely certain. Walk with me, and we’ll talk about your shy friend’s problems.”

Huh, Naruto thought. That was so weird. There were people in the village who wanted to hurt Iruka-sensei? They stalked him? Who was Iruka-sensei’s shy friend? And how was Naruto going to get back at Anko-nee for giving him the Ero Ero spin-off series to read?

x

“What is this?!”

Asuka’s baleful look cast aspersions on Sasuke’s intelligence.

Sasuke glared back at her. “It might be the ugliest thing I’ve ever seen.”

The thing looked like the plucked chickens sold at the market, only it still had its head fully attached, and was presently chirping it off.

“You think you were pretty when you hatched?” Asuka snapped, and then regurgitated liquid, half-digested fish from her throat sack into the ugly little thing’s mouth.

Sasuke’s stomach very nearly did the same process with his lunch. “I am a mammal.” And presently very glad for it.

“Even worse. All scrunched up from getting pushed through the cloaca and covered in blood. You’ve got no room to talk.” She spread her wings and flew off to the pond to feed herself, since Sasuke was apparently an inept fisher and today she didn’t have the patience to wait for him to catch something.

Sasuke made himself a little more comfortable on the gravel and looked at the pathetic creature. It kept chirping even though its Aunt wasn’t there anymore. Anything could have killed it.

Sasuke was half-tempted to let it happen, provided anything would try. Still, the death would probably reflect poorly upon him as the designated guardian, so he resolved to give the squab a chance.

“Take this.” He offered it a senbon. “Nobody’s ever going to protect you. You do it yourself, or you die.”

To his surprise, the thing either understood him or was half-magpie and liked shiny things, because it pulled the senbon out of Sasuke’s fingers with its soft, ineffectual beak, and tucked it under its bare, soup-ingredient wing.

x

Naruto received two pieces of mail in one day. If this went on, he might actually become popular!

Granted, one of those two pieces was a mission assignment – B-rank, annoyingly vague, even more annoyingly lead by Jiraiya – and the other was Neji’s reply to Hinata’s letter, so it wasn’t as though anyone was actually writing to him.
Still, he didn’t let that discourage him, and made the trip to the Hospital to deliver Hinata’s correspondence – which had better be an effusive apology, or Naruto was going to put the fear of prank masters into the Goat Boy.

Hinata was asleep, so Naruto put the letter under her pillow (he almost nicked himself on a kunai she kept there) and would have left, except that on his way out he bumped into Sakura. She was sitting on a bench in the hallway that doubled as the waiting room for non-urgent injuries, smelling like anger – a typical Sakura smell – and blood – not typical exactly, but also fairly common.

She did not smell like she was in pain, though.

“Hey, Sakura. How’s Team Eight?”

* 

Sakura turned her scowl to him. “A joke.”


“Kurenai-sensei missed her calling as a kindergarten teacher. Shino doesn’t talk – he communicates through eye-contact despite wearing shades, and Kiba can’t even take a fucking punch!” Her voice rose to a screech toward the end, inner Sakura momentarily surfacing, and she slammed a hand over her mouth. What if Sasuke-kun heard?

Oh, Sasuke-kun! Where was he? Had he maimed Ino-pig yet? Or was he waiting until there would be no witnesses? Now, Sasuke-kun could actually fight. Sakura wouldn’t have a hope of landing a hit on him – not that she wanted to! She never would really try to hit Sasuke.

She would hit Naruto, happily, and did so, often, but at least Naruto got right back up afterwards. Not like wimpy Kiba who needed Kurenai-sensei to cart him off to the Hospital, moaning and whimpering and complaining about broken ribs. Wimp.

Naruto tilted his head to the side and blinked. “Yeah, sounds like a conspiracy. I bet Sasuke’s not doing any better.”

“And you?” Sakura demanded. “What are you doing?” There wasn’t any vacancy on Team Nine, although at this point she would happily wish Gai-sensei on Naruto, simply out of the desire to spread her unhappiness.


And, much as Sakura wanted to ask, she didn’t. He was a chūnin, after all, if only technically, and that meant he would be assigned C-ranks. Possibly B-ranks, sometimes. In any case, those mission statements were confidential, and asking about their contents would be a rookie mistake.

She wasn’t a rookie anymore. She wasn’t going to be a rookie anymore, at least.

* 

Kakashi scowled. “Can we afford the delay?” By which he meant that they should stop messing about, because he was trying to prevent a war here, and the last time a war happened it drove two of the three Legendary Sannin out of the village. Incidentally, those two that were now present in the Hokage’s office and self-importantly rearranging Kakashi’s complex plans to suit their whims.

What if he failed? What if another war started? Would they both pack up and run for the hills again
and leave the village to Kakashi again?

Tsunade looked at him like he was something smelly left on her doorstep. “You delayed for weeks, with the reasoning that the right team was more important than speed. And I agree with you there—”

“But if you could wait for nearly a month for the team-lead to hand over the Hat,” Jiraiya cut in, “you can wait two days for a crucial team-member to complete crucial intelligence work.”

Kakashi gauged the two old people and briefly met Shikaku’s eye. Apparently, there was no point to arguing. These newcomers came in, took over (thank whatever higher power was having a giggle at the humankind) and started changing things left and right without any consideration for what they might affect down the line.

At least Iruka would be here to salvage what could be salvaged.

“I’m not delaying departure,” he said in the end. “Bring Naruto back by Tuesday morning. We’re leaving later in the day – if I have to do introductions on the road, I will.” It would not be the first time.

Doing the initial meet-and-mesh with a brand-new team on a mission was risky. Doing it on a mission that was supposed to last upwards of a month was extremely risky. Too many things could go wrong. There would be no way to solve any potential conflicts – not until afterwards.

But the mission was critical, so they would deal.

Kakashi had chosen his team well.

Tsunade rolled her eyes at him. “You shut up, Hatake. Be glad I’ve let you keep your own assignment. I can have you on Iwa border patrol so fast your shadow will have to catch up.”

Kakashi inclined his head in a parody of a bow, and didn’t wait for a dismissal to take his leave.

Tsunade dismissed Nara and watched the window where Hatake had disappeared. After a moment she sighed. “Young people. What do you even need Naruto for?”

Jiraiya fell into the Hokage’s super-comfortable chair and rubbed his forehead – a clear indication that he was fighting a headache. “Last-ditch. Umino came to me yesterday with a concern that needs to be addressed post haste, but the only plan I have is about as crazy as an Orochimaru special.”

Tsunade choked. And went to pour herself a cup of sake. She considered asking for details, but if it was Umino’s initiative it was about Sound, and she had happily washed her hands off that whole clusterfuck.

“What about your pet?” she inquired instead. She had every right to be worried, since the critter was presently occupying one of the bedrooms at her house.

She had a house (she had two houses). It was a huge damn adjustment (she had never intended to accept anything Dan left her in his will, but logistics had become nightmarish, and Dan had as good as saved her from beyond the grave).

She was working on it.

Jiraiya dismissively waved his hand. “Asleep.”
“Again?”

“Still,” Jiraiya corrected her. “He’s catching up on thirteen years of missed sleep. Shizune-chan says there’s no need to worry yet. She’s keeping an eye on him.”

“As long as you’re not ‘keeping an eye’ on her.”

“She sure grew up, neh?” he tried half-heartedly.

Tsunade hit him, although mostly out of obligation.

It seemed to lift his mood a little.

x

“I walked home past the Wisteria Crescent. Heard the news.” The armor was a bother. Taking it off might have counted as exercise – it certainly demanded a lot of flexibility and problem-solving. With the difficult part over, Iruka pulled the mesh shirt over his head, chucked it on top of the discarded pile of armor parts, and made a stop at the bathroom.

Once the most pressing problem was solved, he walked into the kitchen. There was an almost-fresh pot of tea there, an unused cup readied on the tray, and the shards of a second cup in the sink. He poured and drank the tea without taking his eyes off the shards.

Well, it could have been worse. At least Kakashi was at home.

“Asuma got down on his knees to beg Hokage-sama to reassign Sasuke,” he reported without raising his voice. Kakashi was just in the bedroom; the door remained ajar, and there was no other noise to interfere.

“Hm.”

“Sakura put Kiba in the Hospital,” Iruka continued, making his way to the bedroom.

“Good on her,” Kakashi gritted out, staring out of the window at the Hokage Mountain, where the hired Doton specialists were making the preparations for crafting Tsunade-sama’s portrait.

“I know this is important to you,” said Iruka. The whole situation frightened him a bit, because there was little that could have affected Kakashi as personally as this. Iruka was the emotional one in the relationship – usually it was Kakashi acting as his sardonic support pillar. “But you’re going to do it – your way, as you do everything. Even if you have to set out without Naruto. I’ll send him out to catch up with you-”

Faster than he could react, a hand covered his mouth and he was pushed backwards. He landed on the bed, and half of Kakashi’s weight landed on him; air was punched out of his chest and he choked, but he couldn’t move, caged in by his partner’s immovable limbs.

He closed his eyes and concentrated on breathing.

If this was what Kakashi needed – to hold onto Iruka, to feel like there was a solid anchor for him in this chaotic, unpredictable world – then Iruka could remain still for a while, clench his teeth and abide the physical contact.

x

Being on a mission with Jiraiya was terrible.
Naruto had loved going on a mission with Iruka-sensei. On the other hand, he was mostly used to Team Seven, too – former Team Seven, now – so he knew how to power through all the annoyance and stupidity.

Jiraiya was fine when he shut up. When he talked, though – talked like Naruto was a random gennin who had unexpectedly impressed the great and powerful Legendary Sannin, and was thus entitled to some special attention and maybe, if he deserved it, some training one day – it was all Naruto could do to bite his tongue and not act so unprofessionally that he would have disappointed Iruka-sensei and earned Kana-san’s displeasure.

Naruto could pretend that Jiraiya was just a stranger. He could. Totally.

He kinda wished he had a book to read so he could act like he was focused on that and not listening to the old man at all, ’cause Dog-sensei was absolutely onto something with that. But not Icha Icha. Naruto would not give Jiraiya the satisfaction of knowing that he had read any of his books.

Thank Inari for Pakkun’s warnings.

He wished he could summon his hunt, but if he was having trouble not yelling at Jiraiya, there was not even the slightest chance that any of his ninken would not try to rip a chunk out of the Sage. Naruto didn’t have a problem with this result in principle, but he didn’t want Jiraiya to know that he knew.

Not yet. Not until Jiraiya had thoroughly hanged himself on the little rope Naruto gave him.

Finally, finally the destination of their trip came within sight.

It was a roadside inn, the kind that sprung up along frequently travelled roads wherever the towns were too far apart. Sometimes new towns grew around them, if the location was good.

See? Naruto did too listen to Iruka’s lectures at the Academy. Occasionally.

“You’ll be meeting one of my contacts,” Jiraiya said, slowing down to a more civilian-like pace. At a snail pace, he walked up to the inn and waited on the lawn in front of the door.

Not even five minutes later a waitress came out onto the porch for a smoke break. Spotting Jiraiya, she hopped down the stairs and approached.

“Natsuko-san!” Jiraiya called out, smiley and loud like Naruto at his most obnoxious.

“Jiraiya-sama,” said the woman-

Wait, what?

Naruto’s eyes were seeing a woman; she was thin and not very pretty (not ugly, just her face was way too hard, with features sharper than a kunai), and the cigarettes she smoked were also thin. Naruto’s ears heard a low, soft voice with just a little rasp to it.

His nose smelled a boy, one who stank of tobacco only because he had spent time inside the inn where other people smoked. A shinobi, definitely. A very, very sick one. Sick like old hag Suzuran had been sick. Dying sick. And also-

“This is Naruto-kun, my protégé, ha ha ha.” Jiraiya pretended he didn’t see the glower Naruto aimed at him. “Naruto, I want you to teach Natsuko-san here that technique you invented at the Academy.”
“Oiroke no Jutsu?” Naruto didn’t expect that. And he especially didn’t like the idea that he could be ordered to give up his personal, signature technique to anyone. Could he even be ordered? He wasn’t sure. Jiraiya must have intentionally waited with the explanation until now, so Naruto wouldn’t have anyone to ask.

“You only called it ‘oiroke’ because you used it to change into naked women,” said the old man, sounding royally amused by the jutsu that had probably saved Naruto’s life several times over. “Technically it should be called the Kage Henge. And it probably counts as kinjutsu, too, damnit.”

Natsuko-san’s eyes bore into Naruto with interest. “You invented a kinjutsu at the Academy? Impressive.”

Naruto squirmed. He tried to suppress the urge to turn around and run as fast as he could. “It was just a coincidence-”

“Still-”

“Less flirting, more work,” Jiraiya cut in. “I’m busy – I’ll come back in a few hours, and you better be done with the teaching. Or I’ll find a way to motivate you properly.”

He body-flickered away.

Natsuko-san glanced back at the inn, and then closed her eyes. “He is gone. And I have to go back to work in seven minutes.”

Naruto wondered if the nearest brothel was so close that Jiraiya could get there, complete his ‘business transaction’ and return so fast. He wasn’t going to ask.

Instead, checking that he had his new wallet with him and could afford a warm meal (ramen, hopefully?) he suggested: “You want to copy the jutsu with the Sharingan? That way you can get back to work and I’ll have time… for… lunch…” He trailed off as he noticed Natsuko-san’s expression.

Natsuko-san stared at him, wide-eyed. “I did not expect that.”
The Rat Seal

Naruto felt like someone had hit him over the head hard, except that it didn’t hurt. “That’s me – Number One Unpredictable Ninja of Konoha. For the record, this is freaking me out, and I’d really appreciate it if you could, you know, explain. Or hint. Or just kinda reassure me that you’re not going to turn around and use this to try and kill the Lamppost, ‘cause he’s a jerk but he’s an ally. Please, please, please tell me that Raiya-ji knows who you really are.”

“Raiya-? Ah. He does. Let me propose a trade, Uzumaki-san. A reassurance in exchange for your method.” The kunoichi (was it okay to call her a ‘kunoichi’ if she was a boy?) dispelled the illusion of the cigarette. “I have worn this disguise for years, and even those that identified me as a shinobi had not arrived at such an outrageous conclusion.” After a little hesitation she asked: “Why ‘the Lamppost’?”

Naruto hopped on the spot. His whole body was thrumming with energy, and there was no outlet. “So, I’ll tell you how I knew you’re you and you’ll explain why I don’t have to be worried ‘bout you…? Deal.”

Natsuko-san sent a shadow clone back to take over the rest of her shift, and led Naruto around the (at the moment empty) stables and in through the back door. There was a narrow staircase just past the vegetable pantry, leading both down to the cellar and up to the rooms. Not the rooms you could rent, though – only the inn’s owner and the staff lived here.

Natsuko-san’s bedroom was tiny. It was about half of Naruto’s bedroom, and that was saying something.

There, with the door closed behind them, she more hinted than actually explained that there had once been a conspiracy, a counter-conspiracy, and a counter-counter-conspiracy, and some unscrupulous powerful people used all that confusion to get rid of their political enemies, and basically the sad result was Natsuko disappearing into Jiraiya’s intelligence network to be useful to her village despite being officially missing.

Naruto decided it made sense – and postponed the good cry he would need to deal with this until later – so he revealed his secret in return: “You smell like the Lamp- I mean, Sasuke.”

“No, I don’t,” protested Natsuko-san. “If anything, I smell like the inn.” She did. Sake and slightly burnt food (their cook wasn’t a very good cook) and the customers, who themselves were like a walking, smoking sweaty rubbish heap.

“Sure,” Naruto agreed. “And under that you smell like metal and herbs and a little like blood. But under that you smell almost exactly like Sasuke.” He snorted. “Your faaace.”

Sasuke was not especially sensitive to the shifting social tides in the village, but after he had noticed the third ANBU (and, considering that, he had no idea how many he had not noticed) lurking on the roofs with the vantage points to see over the Compound wall, he summoned Asuka.

“We are solitary creatures,” pointed out the pelican. “Why keep a flock if it just eats your food and craps into your nest?”

“I eat their food,” Sasuke pointed out.
“You’re not that bad at fishing.” Asuka alit on top of the training post. “But until you grow a brain, I guess I saddled myself with taking care of you, egg-yolk. I’ll find out what I can.”

“The jutsu, please,” Natsuko-san said amiably, but with forcefulness that raised the little hairs on Naruto’s forearms.

“Another deal?” suggested Naruto.

Natsuko-san frowned. “Are you not willing?”

“You’re the only one to ask. Raiya-ji just ordered me, and that was the first I’ve heard ‘bout it,” Naruto explained, just in case Natsuko-san did not know what kind of jerk they were dealing with – although chances were that Natsuko-san knew, and was used to dealing with worse jerks (like, for just a random example, S-class missing nin). “But the thing is, can he do that? I don’t think so. Clan techniques are all secret, and even if I didn’t have a clan—” He wasn’t sure if a dead clan counted. “—I bet a lot of people would be unhappy with this precedent.”

He was proud of himself for remembering the word. And being able to use it.

“You are right. I was not aware—”

“I’m not saying I’m unwilling.” But Jiraiya said it was a kinjutsu, and he had brought Naruto out here to teach it to an S-class missing nin, so it must have been valuable. Naruto would have been stupid to just give it up.

And not just stupid. It would mean that he didn’t value something he created, and he did. He valued his things, especially if he had to work for them.

“Ah. I see. What do you wish for in recompense?”

Naruto knew ‘recompense’ from the Missions Desk, so he didn’t get tripped up. “I want your promise that you won’t teach it to anybody else.”

Natsuko-san showed a little startle, as though she had expected Naruto to ask for something more tangible and less useful. She smiled a little, mostly on one side, and that half-smile seemed almost genuine. “As you wish, Naruto-kun. I swear on my nindo that I will not teach anyone the jutsu you show me today.”

“Got your whirly eyes on?”

“Yes, Naruto-kun.”

“Oiroke no Jutsu!”

A flow of dark, bluish hair covered Naruto’s face. He reached up and adjusted his kanzashi. “Hi, Natsuko-san. My name is Naruko. It is a great pleasure to meet you.”

“Oiroke no Jutsu!” replied Natsuko-san, immediately shifting into their new respective social roles.

Happiness bubbled inside Naruto’s chest. This was great! They could have so much fun! “I have heard much about you. Some of my honourable husband’s friends speak of you very highly.”

“This one is not worthy,” said Natsuko-san, bowing deeply.
Naruto ruthlessly suppressed a chuckle. He released the transformation and shrugged. “Anyway, you can do it with the dog, too, like Henge, ‘cause I was ripping off Henge when I started, but it’s like hundred times easier to do with rat.”

“Most shadow jutsu are,” agreed Natsuko-san.

Sasuke – inexplicably, incongruently – thought of Naruto.

Would Naruto help?

In the past it would never have even occurred to him, but after the way Naruto took Sasuke’s assignment to Team Ten, how he had helped without even thinking about it, how he had even made Sakura halfway useful… yes, if Sasuke asked politely, Naruto would help him get out.

At this point there was no room for dignity.

Jiraiya, feeling quite bouncy and high on life – oh, the lovely Amako-chan could take thirty years off of a man’s age! – found the two kids sitting on the porch in front of the inn, hidden under what from Natsuko passed for a very mild genjutsu.

He circled round and snuck up behind their backs. “Mission accomplished, Naruto?”

Neither of them jumped. Jiraiya pouted. This was a completely unfair letdown.

Naruto sniffed, grimaced, and mumbled something that sounded strangely like: “Shouda at least showered.”

Jiraiya wondered what they had gotten up to, but looking at their faces he could dream on – neither was going to tell him anything. Except Naruto’s cold: “Yes.” Not even an address.

This wasn’t good. If things continued in this vein, taking Naruto on a training trip would amount to mutual torture.

“I’ve got ideas on improving that technique,” he offered. He needed to hook the kid somehow. “A stabilisation seal so you don’t have to keep the transformation up yourself-”

“You could design a tie-in seal to the jutsu, but you couldn’t teach it?” asked Naruto.

Natsuko looked over the top of his head at Jiraiya. Her eyes were mutely asking ‘seriously?’ and for once Jiraiya didn’t have a response under than an equally mute ‘who – me?’ Graceful even in defeat, the gallant Jiraiya generously handed the fruit of his efforts to his agent-

Natsuko snatched the tag out Jiraiya’s hand and promptly handed it over to Naruto, who secreted it away somewhere on his person.

The quickness of the action momentarily stumped Jiraiya – should he strip the kid? Should he bludgeon him with KI until the kid cried and gave his loot back? Should he just beat it out of him-?

“I am sure you can recreate it, Jiraiya-sama,” said Natsuko, cool as ten inches of steel between your ribs.

Jiraiya, further unbalanced, looked between the two co-conspirators.
What the sweet *Icha Icha* hell had happened here?

He couldn’t even get a frank report from his agent with Naruto sitting there and listening to every word. Discreet the boy could be, of that Jiraiya had no doubt – but he was a true-blooded hellion, the son of the Red-Hot Habanero, and Jiraiya wasn’t going to hand him anything more than he had to.

Because, contrary to popular opinion, that seal was something he had designed for long-term shadow clones, and which he had been going to give to Natsuko anyway, so she could have a clone stationed at the inn semi-permanently. He was only assuming that it would work with the shadow transformation, too. It might need tweaking. *He* definitely needed *feedback*.

Basically, he needed to get rid of the kid and down to some actual work.

“Hey, Naruto…”

The boy climbed to his feet and stood at attention, blank-faced. He did not give even a damn inch.

“Now I’ve got some business here,” Jiraiya said resignedly. “And something I should really take care of a few towns over. Take this to Tsunade-hime, would you?” He pulled a storage scroll full of intel out of his haori and gave it to the boy.

The chances that anything would happen to it were minimal, and it wasn’t as though he didn’t usually use runners. The scroll was sealed, and only about five people in the village knew how to unseal it.

x

Naruto took the scroll and stashed it away. He didn’t speak, ‘cause he was sure his happiness at not having to endure a bitten tongue all the way back to Konoha would have showed. He only just managed to keep from yelling ‘freedom!’ at the top of his voice.

“Goodbye, Naruto-kun. It was nice to meet you.”

“Likewise, Natsuko-san. *Ja ne!*”

And he was off. The only thing missing right now was…

“*Kuchiyose no Jutsu!*”

x

Iruka had finished for the day and was on his way home – surprisingly early, it was barely even dark outside – when someone stepped out of the shadows and into his way.

“Sasuke-kun?”

The boy looked… terrible. Iruka felt something in his chest clench. He missed children, missed teaching, and even though Sasuke was not one of his students anymore, that did not mean Iruka had suddenly stopped caring.

Could it be…? Was Iruka responsible for the violet bruises under the boy’s eyes and for the lines of despair etched in his face? Surely… surely not…?

“I need to find Naruto,” said Sasuke.

“H-he’s on a mission-”
“When will he be back?”

“Tomorrow.” Hopefully, Iruka added in his mind. If Jiraiya kept him any longer, Kakashi might go postal and have his hunt track him down. “What-”

But Sasuke was already gone.

x

Jiraiya kicked his feet up onto the next chair and took a lengthy, luxuriant pull from his pipe. “He took a real shine to you, that brat.”

“Did he,” deadpanned Natsuko.

Jiraiya wasn’t aware of what he had done to offend this time, but he still remembered the consequences of his last conflict with his agent, and dearly hoped never to have to relive that. Genjutsu users were the worst.

“The technique will be useful, but what makes it necessary right at this moment?” she demanded.

Jiraiya took another deep pull from the pipe, sighed, and explained the whole foolish, ridiculous, insane plan that he had concocted to get out of the corner into which he got pressed by the blackmail-and-bribery combo of a goddamn chuunin. He had wanted to teach that Umino kid, too, once upon a time, only after the unfortunate Ero Ero Paradigm business the kid was not so secretly planning to use Jiraiya’s fragile innocent body to test out whether death by papercuts was a feasible assassination method, and Jiraiya somehow felt that the harmoniousness of their teacher-student relationship would have suffered for it.

And no, Jiraiya wasn’t nervous about teaching Naruto. At all. The close relationship between Naruto and Umino? The silent treatment all the way from Konoha to this place? The rumours spread around Konoha lately about Jiraiya running away because he had refused to legitimise his bastard child (with various suggestions and betting pools on said bastard child’s identity)? Bah. He wasn’t the slightest bit worried.

Natsuko listened to the entire sordid tale, then contemplated for a while, and eventually inquired: “You intend to put my little brother to work in the service industry?”

x

Sasuke locked the gates of the Compound, activated all the security seals he knew how to use, and sat down at the kitchen table to compose one report and one letter. The report, he knew, would have to be scrupulously truthful in a way none of his reports for Team Seven’s mission ever really were.

This time there was no margin of error. It would be his word against Team Ten’s. He could not be caught in a lie, or even in uncertainty. Fortunately, Sasuke had an excellent memory (and for the latter part of the confrontation he had a picture-perfect Sharingan memory), so that was not a problem.

The letter… the letter was harder.

But he could do it. He could. Compared to what would happen to him if he didn’t, this had to be easy, right? Right. Now, what might the dead last want as an incentive?

Sasuke was ready to offer just about anything short of an eye (he needed both of those to kill that man).
“It will be good for him,” Jiraiya said lightly. “Suffering builds character.”

Natsuko looked at him like she was considering which of the poisons she had available would work best. “He has suffered, and from what I have seen it built nothing.”

Even in the guise of a civilian, without emanating any killing intent whatsoever, her tone of voice made Jiraiya’s reproductive organs attempt to crawl inside his body.

Natsuko’s eyes were dark – shitty damn past, too much bad killing to remember – and her expression stony. “Do you believe he will learn patience?”

“Unlikely.” Jiraiya himself had learnt it only at a much older age, and only after he had been faced with the consequences of his recklessness.

“The only thing this will accomplish is burning the Natsuko identity,” she concluded.

“I’m not going to collate you!” Jiraiya snapped, rolling his eyes. He was not actually stupid, no matter what Orochimaru used to say. “I admit, it would be immensely practical if you two could just switch off being Natsuko, but he has little skill, no training, no patience, and I’ve heard he doesn’t accept instruction. I can’t drop him into the deep end of intelligence work and expect him to swim.” Well, he could if he weren’t afraid of what Natsuko would do to him if the kid died. And Jiraiya was very afraid – it wouldn’t have been anything as simple and sweet as death.

Natsuko stared out of the window, pensive, or perhaps melancholy. Jiraiya sighed. He knew she chose this appearance on purpose – there was nothing ample or curvy about her, just so he had nothing to admire. So cruel.

“Being a woman is difficult enough, but being a woman the people here have known for years – even the best of my agents would be hard-pressed to do that.” Jiraiya had no idea how she did it. He had tried going female – it made research ever so much easier – but his masculinity just kept shining through and bursting out of him. Oh, well. “Maybe it’s time for Natsuko to move on. We could re-establish the identity elsewhere for you to share.”

“Wait until you have evaluated him before you start planning, Jiraiya-sama,” said Natsuko, tone of voice confirming that suspicion of melancholia. “I am not at all certain that this is feasible.”
Collared and Leashed

Naruto went through the security routine at the gates – for the first time he did it all by himself, and it was really just as annoying as Dog-sensei always made it seem, and he couldn’t stop yawning, even though it wasn’t even midnight yet – but didn’t quite get to the Hokage Tower for the mandatory check-in before a huge shadow covered the lamplight and then descended on him.

He jumped clear. Rikku crouched for a leap, but did not attack. Juuji growled threateningly.

Annai, however, only looked up and grinned. “Hey, it’s the Lamppost’s summon! Hi, summon-san!”

Apparently, the pelican’s treatment of Sasuke had made an impression on both Naruto’s canine siblings.

The bird landed on the railing on the outer staircase of the nearest house and glared balefully. “You. Hn.” For Inari’s sake, was Sasuke contagious? “You just try scent-marking my summoner and-”

“No! No worries!” Naruto yelled out over the terrible description of a terrible nightmare. “He’s all yours! All yours!”

The pelican turned her head to the side and rolled one suspicious eye. “He better. Now, my summoner wrote you a letter, gator bait. He sweated blood over it, so you will give it the attention it deserves.”

Is it opposite day? Naruto wondered. Or has Sasuke found out about Naruto’s mission? Nah, no way.

No way, unless it was all a setup – unless somebody wanted Sasuke to find out and go off the deep end, and if that was the case then Naruto would get involved. Even if it meant tying Sasuke up and delivering him mummified to Natsuko-san, who would probably have to genjutsu him to hell and back to un-brainwash him or brainwash him back to normal or-

“Are you listening to me, stripeless?” demanded the pelican.

“Sure,” Naruto replied, and took the damn letter. He read it. Then he read it again. No, it hadn’t changed in the meantime. He looked up, utterly confused. “Did the bastard hit his head?”

“No,” snapped the bird, who herself had hit the bastard’s head enough that it might have resulted in brain damage.

Naruto absently scratched between Juuji’s ears, thus distracting him from the letter, which the ninken had been trying to read. Rikku had already read it over Naruto’s shoulder. Annai, in the meantime, was too busy admiring the pelican to care about Sasuke’s message.

Naruto nodded to himself. “I’ve got to report to Tsunade, but the Compound is my next stop.”

’cause there was a line. And this crap crossed it.

x

It had been a long time since Ino had seen her Dad so angry.

The Yamanaka were pale, and when they flushed they flushed horribly; Ino’s Dad was approximately the colour of a spider lily as he tried to keep the rage inside.
Ino shook her head. “That’s not… that’s not what happened. That’s not how it happened!”

“I know you have a crush on that boy-”

“I do, but that doesn’t make me stupid!” She realised she was shouting, but couldn’t seem to calm down. She was sure that they were two matching spider lilies right now. “I am telling you, that’s not what happened!”

“He did not attack you? Then what happened to your hair?!”

“It got scorched off by a ninjutsu, oh my god, Dad, training accidents happen all the damn time – two months ago Chouza-ji-chan gave you a broken arm-!”

“I spoke with Asuma! That did not happen during a spar-!”

“The hell does Asuma-sensei know? He was asleep-!”

“Then Uchiha shouldn’t have been using ninjutsu-!”

“If we only trained when sensei’s awake, we’d never get anywhere! He’s like another Shikamaru! At least Sasuke-kun takes being a ninja seriously-!”

“Enough!” Ino’s Dad roared.

Ino took a step back. Then another. And another. And then she ran out the front door and slammed it after herself. This was some… some ridiculous crusade against Sasuke-kun, and they were using her against him.

And her Dad wasn’t listening.

x

Sasuke opened the gate, let Naruto in and closed the gate again. The security seals flashed and reactivated.

Aside from the various village-appointed guardians mostly interested in Sasuke’s bloody inheritance, Naruto was the first visitor he had had in years. Obviously, Kakashi had somehow managed to get in and stroll around, but not when Sasuke was at home, so that didn’t count as a visit. Thankfully, he was the only one (not even ANBU managed to enter the Compound) so it was probably the Sharingan that let him pass.

“I’m going to need details,” said Naruto.

Sasuke nodded. The loathsome squeeze in his chest was gratitude, he knew, to Naruto for coming, for coming alone, for not laughing, and for treating this seriously. For not commenting about the holes in the roofs of the nearby houses, about the fire damage to many of the structures, about the oppressive silence and emptiness.

Naruto noticed – of course he noticed – but he, surprisingly, had the smarts to keep his mouth shut about it.

“It escalated too fast,” Sasuke said quietly. His voice was hoarse. “And too far.” His throat hurt, but he took a sip of his chamomile tea and did his best to describe the whole situation to his ex-teammate.

_Chuunin_, he thought. _Is this why?_
Huh.

Naruto listened quietly, even though he didn’t stay still for five seconds at a time. He fidgeted, drank the tea Sasuke poured him and fidgeted some more. Eventually, once the story was out, he rubbed his forehead and puffed up his cheeks.

It made him look like a village idiot again.

This impression, Sasuke realised for the first time, was a lie.

“Let me think ‘bout this,” Naruto grumbled, setting his elbows on top of the table. “Hm, and feed me, bastard. ’s the least you can do.”

Without a word, Sasuke stood and went to the stove to cook a late, late dinner.

“Shikamaru! Shikamaru!”

Shikamaru rolled over on his bed to face the wall and pulled his blanket over his head. Nothing short of a village-wide alert would make him get up. Possibly if his bed was on fire… Nah. Chances were his Mother would put him out before he acquired any significant injuries.

“Shikamaru, if you don’t open this door, I’m going to break it!” Fists pounded on said door.

Shikamaru pressed his palm to the ear that wasn’t already buried in the sound-muffling depths of the pillow.

With a crack the bolt broke, and the door was pushed to the side. Ino fell through it, breathing hard, with little hitching sounds that suggested she was crying. Shikamaru couldn’t recall witnessing Ino cry for real in the past few years.

Chouji cried more than she did. In fact, Shikamaru himself cried more, especially at those times when his Mother decided to personally supervise his physical conditioning.

In light of this, Shikamaru deigned to roll over and pull the blanket down. He did not actually want his bed to be set on fire, and Ino in tears was an unpredictable creature.

Holy mother of the Sage, he thought, catching a glimpse of her face in the light from the hallway, she was distraught. He hadn’t known she was capable of this depth of emotion.

“What,” he grumbled.

“Shika, you have to help. I messed up and now Sasuke-kun-”

Shikamaru groaned and pulled the blanket back up. ‘Sasuke-kun’ was an instant nope from him.

“No, wait, this is different. They’re going to section him!”

Good damn idea, Shikamaru thought. Finally. Couldn’t have happened to a more deserving guy.

“Because of me!” Ino wailed. “I didn’t mean to do this!”

Shikamaru was treated to a retelling of events that made the Chuunin Exams (rogue Sannin included) sound like a perfectly sedate and rational affair. Some days he wondered if he would not have done better in some other village. Maybe even a civilian one. He would probably enjoy fishing.
Whole days to look at the clouds. He was sure crabs were great conversationalists, compared to some of the people he knew.

“So,” he said once Ino trailed off into sniffling and weeping (not the crocodile tears, but full-on ugly blubbering with snot and blotchy cheeks), “you escalated your prank-”

“It’s not a prank!” she gasped out. “I want him!”

“-your pigtail-pulling,” Shikamaru amended, “and assaulted him-”

“It’s not assault! It’s just the only way I can get a reaction out of him!”

“assaulted him,” Shikamaru repeated emphatically, “to the point that you drove the guy to the verge of a nervous breakdown. In self-defense he harmed your hair, and you tried to kill him-”

“I did not!” Ino protested. “It was just like… just like I fight with you or Chouji! A spar! With the requisite amount of drama!”

“Ino,” Shikamaru said, exasperation rising rapidly, “I know what you can do with your killing intent. Chouji does, too. But Uchiha does not. He thought you were genuinely trying to kill him.”

Ino made a whining sound from the back of her throat and burst into a new wave of sobbing. She shuffled on her knees closer to Shikamaru’s bed and pawed at his leg. “Shika, Shika, you’ve got to help him!”

“No, I don’t.”

“Shikamaru, please.”

This wasn’t fair. Shikamaru was intimately familiar with the whole range of Ino’s cons, and this was as genuine as anything. How was he supposed to resist? Ino’s eyes were wide blue pools of crystalline sadness and, okay, he was not made of stone.

Much as he often wished he were, because maybe then troublesome women would leave him alone, and he could get through his life peacefully with no responsibilities, endless cloud-watching time and only the occasional pigeon shitting on him as opposed to a whole damn ninja village.

He laboriously pulled himself up to a sitting position. “What a pain…”

Just as he expected, the moment Sasuke turned up for ‘team training’, he was apprehended by a couple of ANBU and escorted to the Psychiatric Department building attached to the Hospital. It was better than if he had been dumped straight at the Institution, where they put the cases slated for sectioning, but he did not have high hopes of being released.

He only had Naruto’s desperate plan and a well of anger seven years deep. It was boiling now – ready for explosion after they left him to cook for two hours in a waiting room. Morons! Did they forget he had been trained for tardiness by Hatake Kakashi, who took it as a personal mission to prepare his gennin for the wartime hurry-up-and-wait routine?

After those two hours, the latest in a long line of Sarutobi fuck-ups let himself into the room.

“I had to report it,” said Asuma, half-explanation and half-excuse.

He didn’t owe Sasuke anything. In fact, Sasuke had no idea what the chain-smoking slacker was
even doing here. Had they made him come because he was now technically Sasuke’s jounin-sensei? What a farce.

Sasuke doubted anyone had believed his account, no matter how detailed his report had been. After all, he had a history of violence against his peers, didn’t he? He knew that Inuzuka had reported him as he had threatened, never mind that at the time Sasuke had been so high on adrenalin he might have attacked the Hokage himself if provoked.

“And I expect you framed it as an unprovoked attack, too,” Sasuke snapped, once the pressure in his chest became too great, and it was speak or vomit. “After all, what is years of systematic harassment, escalating from stalking to sexual? I guess the Council wants my genes badly enough that they are fine with a gaggle of thirteen-year-olds trying their luck literally throwing themselves at me.”

He thought back to what Naruto had told him. Who knew how many of those thirteen-year-olds were actually older and trained for it? Sasuke shuddered. And shuddered some more. He couldn’t seem to stop. He put his arms around himself in a parody of a hug-

Asuma stepped closer and raised his arm-

Sasuke leapt away and up, crouching on the wall and holding up a Tiger seal. He would burn himself, too, if he released a great fireball inside this room, but he felt like it would have been worth it.

“Calm down, kid,” said the jounin. He made a show of backing away and sitting down. He stared mostly at the floor, but he did glance at Sasuke briefly – a blink-of-an-eye fast assessment. “I’ve got to admit, I didn’t expect this. Why didn’t you tell anybody?”

Sasuke sneered.

Who the hell was there to tell? The Academy teachers never did anything (even after a bunch of girls had cornered him in the boys’ bathroom), and the pathetic parody of the Military Police that replaced his slaughtered clan had laughed him out the door that one time he had naively tried (when the Ohmura twins jumped him on his way home from the market and destroyed all his groceries in their mutual fight over which one he liked better).

The only thing that saved him from home invasion and outright assault were the seals placed on the walls of the Compound. It was one of the reasons why he had never moved out of the house where his parents were murdered, no matter what the psych people said about him living there.

The Psychiatric Department was another bunch of useless, brain-dead bootlickers.

Asuma scratched at his beard. “The way Ino’s acting – it’s annoying, yeah. But I guess I never thought of it as frightening.”

Sasuke wanted to say he wasn’t scared of one pathetic little girl playing at a kunoichi, but this was the point – the point Naruto told him to make and then moan about as much as he could. Stoic poise was worth shit to him now. Konoha was, and had been for years, enemy ground. He was tired.

It wasn’t Ino as such. It was that Ino was one of many, and they never seemed to sleep, so Sasuke had to be constantly on alert, and this had passed exhausting two years ago. Fine, he admitted it: he couldn’t deal with this. No, he was not being histrionic. He was being harassed.

“You thought it was funny,” he hissed.

Asuma made a pathetic attempt to deny the accusation.
Sasuke walked out of the Psychiatric Department building. On his own.

“Did it work?” asked Asuka, who had been waiting for him outside the whole time, substituting bloody-mindedness for patience.

“We’ll see,” replied Sasuke. “But I think it did.”

“Huh.” Asuka spread and re-folded her wings. “That dog-kid is not half stupid.”

Sasuke shrugged. It was becoming increasingly obvious to him that he didn’t understand anything.

Iruka put his head in his hands, closed his eyes, and tried to chase away the compunctions. He needed to concentrate. This was important work. He couldn’t afford to get distracted-

“Headache?” asked Tsunade-sama’s shadow clone.

Iruka shook his head. He knew how to work through headaches – he was an Academy teacher. This was worse. He had never done well with guilt. “I made a mistake. It may cost one of my students their career.”

The clone shrugged. “That is what happens when you make the decisions. Lives, friends, family, careers. You will get used to it, Umino.”

Iruka shook his head. He could explain – but then again, could he? How would he explain that he, a shinobi, a chuunin, a teacher and an administrator had played a prank and misjudged its consequences to the point that what should have been innocent fun turned into a complete disaster?

“Well, if you don’t feel like sharing, be so kind and focus.”

“Yes, Hokage-sama.” Although, truthfully, Iruka had no idea how. He prayed to kami that Jiraiya would come through and save the boy.
“N-naruto-kun!”

“Breathe, Hinata,” admonished Kiba-kun, rolling his eyes. Hinata obediently took a deep breath and stopped trying to squirm out from under her teammate’s arm. Kiba-kun had made touching a habit, and Hinata did not really mind. It was nice. Warm. Reassuring.

She just – well, a part of her hadn’t wanted Naruto-kun to see. Another part was breathlessly awaiting his reaction, hoping for-

“Hey, guys!” Naruto-kun cheerfully called out.

-something that obviously was not going to happen. It was childish of her, this… this need to call attention to herself. She was very lucky to have Naruto’s friendship. Or perhaps just his friendliness, but she could work on the building of their friendship, as long as he was receptive.

“I don’t know if you’re allowed chocolate,” Naruto-kun said quietly, coming over to the bed and reaching under his t-shirt, “so let’s not tell the nurses. Enjoy.” He pulled out a flat white box with a thin purple line bisecting it at the golden ratio.

“I-is that…?”

“From my favourite patisserie,” he said. And then scowled at Kiba-kun. “Which means if anyone but Hinata so much as sniffs the chocolate, I’ll put the fear of the werewolf ghosts in you. That goes for Akamaru, too.” He paused and counted on his fingers, before adding: “Oh, and Shino.”

Hinata giggled. Naruto-kun was funny.

“Go sit on a porcupine,” Kiba-kun muttered, sticking out his tongue. Hinata held the pretty little box in her hands. She moved to open it, but Naruto-kun put his hand over hers, and she forgot how to breathe. She became paralysed, motionless except for the rush of her blood which went all, predictably, to her head.

“No sharing, either, Hinata,” Naruto-kun admonished. It sounded playful, but he meant it. “Oh, and Tenten says hi.”

Tenten-chan had visited Hinata to confirm that Hinata had accepted Neji-nii-san’s apology. She was very kind, offered to deliver Hinata’s response to Neji-nii-san’s latest letter, and invited Hinata to call her Tenten-chan. It was all very… very unexpected. But nice.

Hinata supposed maybe she finally made a girl friend.

Oh, and apparently Naruto-kun was hinting that there was a letter hidden inside the box, so Hinata definitely could not open it in front of either of her teammates.

Still blushing but feeling far less lightheaded, she finally remembered what it was she had wanted to
say but hadn’t because of her exhaustion and the drugs. “Oh, Naruto-kun! I am so sorry! I forgot to congratulate you!”

“Congratulate me?” he repeated, confused.

“Yeah, congratulate him?” added Kiba-kun.

Akamaru-kun barked. Kiba-kun looked down at him and said: “Oh, that. Right.”

“Of course!” Hinata insisted. “Congratulations on your promotion, Naruto-kun! I always knew you could do it!” He could do anything he really wanted to do, she believed that firmly. “But I have been here all this time, and I don’t have a present.”

“Don’t worry about that, Hinata!” Naruto-kun grinned widely. “What I really want is for you to get well, and kick some serious arse. That will make me happy!”

Hinata’s blush and lightheadedness came back full force, but she didn’t need to think – there was only one thing she could say now: “I promise!”

The man sitting in the conference room seemed far too young for the position of an ambassador. But then, the same could have been said of Iruka, so Iruka bowed (not too deeply; he represented the winning side here) and took his seat.

“Kaguya Kimimaro,” the Sound ninja said softly.

“Umino Iruka,” replied Iruka. “Do you require medical attention?”

The pale stranger made an ambivalent motion with one hand. “It would not help. This has been going on for a while, and at least this way I may be of some use yet.”

Iruka nodded, and marginally relaxed. This person was such a welcome change after dealing with the other so-called _jounin_ of the Sound village (who, he had learnt, had been promoted to _jounin_ on the basis of surviving some twisted death tournament, without having to fulfil any other requirements). Now Iruka could finally see them moving forward with the treaty and accomplishing something.

If he never had to see Tayuya again, it would be too soon.

“Your accommodations are satisfactory?” he inquired, eyes skipping from his stack of annotated proposals to the untouched tea tray in front of Kimimaro-san. Kimimaro-san had brought no papers with him.

“I usually live in a hospital bed, Umino-san,” said the Sound ninja, and although it might have sounded sarcastic from someone else, from this man it came as a simple, bare fact. He did not confirm whether he was satisfied with his lodgings, only implied that he was used to worse.

Iruka felt a niggling of sympathy and wondered if this was the result of Orochimaru’s experimentation on this man. He had a mental image of dim, dank laboratories filled with the groaning and the screams of interred subjects.

The door behind Iruka opened and closed, and Tsunade-sama’s shadow clone approached the table. She pushed a thick, heavy blanket into Kimimaro-san’s hands and glared at him until he obediently wrapped it around himself.
The clone scoffed. “Umino, make sure he stays warm, or we’ll be holding the rest of the negotiations in the Hospital while I’m desperately trying to keep him alive long enough.”

“Yes, Hokage-sama,” replied Iruka. For one thing, it was easy to care for the well-being of someone as fragile and polite as this ambassador. For another, there was little as frightening as the wrath of an iryounin, and Iruka would prefer not to come into Tsunade-sama’s crosshairs. Again.

“And, Kaguya, this discussion is not over. Just because your medic could not do anything does not mean I can’t.” She left as fast as she had come in.

Iruka and Kimimaro-san both stared after her for a moment, before looking at one another.

This was it. Now the treaty was in Iruka’s hands.

He took a deep breath. Thought about how to open the possibly most important conversation he would ever have in his life. And said: “Would you like a fresh pot of tea?”

x

Sasuke chewed the last dumpling. “I should have just told them all I was gay when they started with this.” Just the threat of it had shut up Sakura effectively enough.

Naruto considered the idea seriously. “But then you’d have to deal with Kiba’s reaction, and I’m not sure it’d be worth it… no, wait, it would definitely be worth it. Too bad you didn’t think of it four years ago.”

Sasuke guessed he had probably been too traumatised to even notice the airheads in the beginning, and they hadn’t gotten nearly as aggressive yet. And then, by the time he woke up to the realisation that they were unbearable, their behaviour was already status quo.

He was like that frog, slowly cooked because it hadn’t occurred to him to jump out of the pot until the water had gotten too hot and it was too late.

“Hey, bastard,” Naruto said quietly.

Sasuke aimed his dango stick at him in a parody of a threatening gesture.

Naruto didn’t laugh, or challenge him to a spar. “It’s good. It’s – I honestly never expected to see you unbend enough to ask for help. And it’s good—”

It wasn’t. It was shameful. But also practical.

“-so I hope you don’t suddenly lose the ability again. And you’ve got people in your corner now, so. It doesn’t matter if your friends are not human. Human families aren’t all they’re cracked up to be.”

Well, that one Sasuke had known.

x

“Will you stop that, Haruno?!”

“Stop what, Inuzuka?!”

Shino sighed and habitually pushed his glasses up his nose, even though they hadn’t slid down. “You have been leaking killing intent for the duration of the team meeting.”
Sakura stopped in the middle of raising her hand to punch the stupid, loud dog boy. Only Naruto was worse-

*Che!* *Naruto may be more annoying, but only because you’re annoyed whenever he shows you up!* inner Sakura informed her mercilessly.

“Yeah, it’s impressive for a gennin, but cut it out!” insisted dog boy, seconded by Akamaru’s growl. “If you’ve got a problem with us, suck it up or go complain! There’s got to be some place for all the unwanted cast-offs people leave behind!”

Sakura didn’t care if he’d land in the Hospital again. She would punch him—

*Shannaro!*

“This is absurd,” she told them in her best approximation of a calm voice (which wasn’t a good one at all). She focused on pulling her KI back – she hadn’t been aware of it.

It was difficult. Inner Sakura was refusing to part with her righteous fury.

“That woman is Suzume-sensei’s second coming,” Sakura lamented. Kurenai *coddled* them! How did she expect them to ever become real shinobi? Kakashi was a *terrible* teacher in that he never taught anything, but at least he let them try out real-life situations. “You had a C-rank, right?”

“Yeah.” Kiba nodded, already less tense as Sakura’s KI abated. “You’ve got to have at least one to get into the Chuunin Exams, and even then it’s embarrassing to have just the required one.”

“So, what did she do? Fight all the enemies herself? While you sat in a tree and watched?”

“Enemies?” Kiba shared a quick look with Shino, and then shook his head at her. “Eh, Sakura… it was just an escort mission. I mean, we were sorta attacked by bandits, but when they came close enough to see our headbands they just turned around and ran away again.”

“You’ve never killed anyone?”

“…eh… nope?” Kiba’s cheeks went pink and he looked at his sandals. “We’d have got to it in the Chuunin Exams, but then that thing happened, and…” He shrugged.

Akamaru, too, was looking at his paws.

“My kikaichu drained the chakra of one of the bandits to the point that he died,” Shino said quietly. “It was not my intent. Civilian combatants have less chakra than I expected.”

“Oh.” Kiba’s head shot up, and he stared at his teammate with guilt written all over his face. “Why didn’t you say?”

“Why? I suspected Kurenai-sensei might wish to *talk to me about it.*”

Kiba nodded with perfect understanding. “Makes sense.”

“Don’t you think we should *tell* somebody about her?” Sakura demanded. This was absurd. She had resented Kakashi, and still thought that he was entirely ridiculous-

*Oh, do you? Since when is ridiculous spelled H-O-T-T?*

—but even despite his atrocious habits and the lack of tutelage he provided, it had never even occurred to her to complain.
Kurenai-sensei was making her feel like she was backsliding. Team Eight was like extra Academy, and she was past that. She didn’t need someone to hold her hand – she needed someone to teach her how to break other people’s hands. And other assorted body parts.

She knew she sucked – that had been made abundantly clear to her. She needed to stop sucking, and Kurenai-sensei was all smiles and reassurance that she didn’t suck (even though she obviously did!) like she was catering to some stuck-up Clan Heir and dooming the gennin in her care to mediocrity!

*If we don’t stop her, she’s gonna bleeping ruin us!* inner Sakura yelled so loudly that Sakura’s ears rang with it.

“This particular approach to leadership did help Hinata in the past,” Shino pointed out. “Her severe inferiority complex impeded the whole team, and Kurenai-sensei’s reassurance mitigated the handicap.”

“Great,” Sakura grumbled, hitting her left palm with her right fist, “but I’m not Hinata. And I don’t want to be coddled.”

Akamaru barked sharply.

Sakura scowled at him. “What?”

“He suggests we compromise,” interpreted Kiba. “He says we should talk to Kurenai-sensei first. Maybe she can adjust her teacher persona for this month, so you don’t suffer for it?”

Who would have thought? drawled Inner. *First Naruto-baka grows a brain, and now dog boy does, even if he’s sharing it with the actual dog.*

Shino inclined his head and possibly telepathically reassured Kiba that he was in complete agreement. Or so it looked to Sakura.

*So, with certified genius Shikamaru and semi-verbal Shino, how many smart-ish guys have we overlooked at the Academy?*

Shut up, Sakura thought at herself.

x

“My Youthful Rival!”

Kakashi stepped to the side and let the whirlwind of green-and-pain harmlessly pass him by. It was good to be rid of the Hat. This way the ‘Hokage-san’ thing was over and done with, and he could focus on the more important things – like life’s little challenges.

Except, sadly, right now was not a good time.

“I’m on a way to a meeting,” he said, eyes trailing over well-familiar kanji. He flipped a page.

“I shan’t Choose a Challenge that would keep you longer than Three Hours-”

“Not that kind of a meeting,” Kakashi admitted. He felt a smidgen of regret, but none filtered into his voice.

Gai braked to a halt. He drooped (Kakashi was a bit tempted to water him – he quite resembled a dehydrated plant). When he spoke, his voice was low, serious, and mostly devoid of superfluous capitals: “I shall see you when you return from your Endeavour, my Rival. Keep in mind that in that
particular race, the one who passes the finish line first is the loser.” Meaning ‘don’t die before me, or I’ll be sad, and that would be terrible’.

“Agree to disagree,” Kakashi replied, and went on his way to the designated training ground.

Naruto was a little surprised when Rikku gave him the assignment scroll, but he followed his hunt to Training Ground Twenty-Eight, and was happy to just mess around until whoever was supposed to come would come and explain what was going on.

The person who came was Kakashi. He was three minutes early. Naruto tripped over nothing, nearly fell onto his face, and stared. Then he realised that Kakashi was probably lost on the road of life and very, very late to a completely different meeting, and his presence here was just a coincidence-

“Ah, thanks for making sure Naruto got here, ninjen-san,” said Dog-sensei.

Naruto tripped again; at least this time he managed to stay upright.

Rikku barked a farewell and dismissed himself, closely followed by Juuji and Annai. Their little puffs of chakra smoke vanished in the breeze.

Already the day was a little glummer.

“So, who are we waiting for, and are they the kind of people who know you’re usually three hours late?” Naruto inquired. “cause I think you might be falling into the hole you dug for yourself.”

“They’ll be here,” the jounin assured him. “Genma and Nishi-sensei are both punctual shinobi.”

“All guys?” Naruto was a little skeptical of this, but maybe that was a part of Iruka-sensei’s prank. Because in hindsight it was very obvious who assigned Sakura and Sasuke to their teams. Not that even Iruka-sensei could have foreseen how catastrophically badly the Team Ten incident would go.

That was what Iruka-sensei had taught Naruto: whenever you pranked someone, you ran the risk of unintended consequences. But he liked Iruka-sensei, so he was not even going to hint anything to Sasuke-bastard.

Dog-sensei shrugged from behind his current reading: Icha Icha Undercover. “I asked for Inuzuka Hana, but they said something about too many dogs on one team. Eh. I just wanted the eye-candy.”

“There’s gotta be a lot of attractive chuunin ‘round.” Naruto looked around. Granted, right now there were only trees, a trio of badly scarred training logs and a broken kusarigama somebody just left lying there. No non-Naruto chuunin at all. “Though, obviously, we can’t have Iruka-sensei, ‘cause he’s got better things to do.”

No, wait, there was a chuunin. He body-flickered in, scattered a few leaves, and nodded at Kakashi like they were old acquaintances. He had a medic’s pouch, but nothing else on him that could give Naruto even a hint of who he was. He smelled like the Hospital, blood and bile, onigiri and plums (in his pouch) and omelet (recently eaten). He also smelled nervous, even though he didn’t show it at all.

“Maa?” Kakashi’s eye, narrowed in amused suspicion, peered over the violently purple cover at Naruto. “You think Iruka-sensei is attractive?”

“That’s a moot point, ‘cause you think so,” Naruto dissembled. One of the things Anko-nee had taught him was that you should only ever answer trick questions about a person’s significant other if
you were sure you could take them both in a fight. Yeah, no.

“Did you finally grow the balls, Hatake-san?” inquired the iryounin.

Dog-sensei – only he wasn’t Dog-sensei anymore, he was now Dog-taichou – just shrugged.

Naruto knew you shouldn’t spread personal information about your allies around, even though it itched. He didn’t think the medic would be anything like Mizuki-bastard, but Naruto was still thanking Inari that Mizuki died without getting the chance to use or spread the information about Iruka-sensei Naruto had stupidly blurted.

Naruto shouldn’t have brought up Iruka-sensei at all.

Crud.

“Sorry,” he muttered.

Iryounin-san laughed. “That’s okay, kid – I knew them since before you even started the Academy, and it’s not like they were hiding it.”

Naruto deflated in relief. And then grinned. “I know, right?”

“We were hiding it,” Kakashi protested. “We are still, in fact, hiding it.”

Iryounin-san and Naruto both stared at him. Then Naruto remarked: “You’re not very good at hiding, huh?”

“You know what I am good at?” Kakashi inquired conversationally.

Naruto barely managed to swap himself with a clone before the wave of mud fell over him. The clone popped, leaving Naruto standing behind a nearby tree and feeling second-hand slimy.

“Are we sparring already?” asked a new voice. There was a guy in a standard uniform ambling up the path, hands in his pockets, expression like his mind was a thousand miles away.

“You’re that exam proctor!” Naruto exclaimed happily, bounding over to the rest of the team. He was now a chuunin who was teammates with people that proctored the Chuunin Exams. This was great!

“A-ano…” spoke an unexpected fifth person. There was a kunoichi, after all. She didn’t look like anything special – short dark hair, mesh shirt and pants, and a long brown vest that tied with a black sash. There was a medic’s pouch attached to the sash. “I was told to report here by Umino-san?”

Even Kakashi looked startled, although the only sign was the way his hand moved upward as if to reach for his hitai-ate, before he changed his mind. He clapped once.

“Let’s start with introductions. You all know me. Nishi-sensei?”

“Aokabi Nishi. Chuunin. I specialise in medical ninjutsu.” That was all kinda obvious, but the way the guy said it was so clearly a threat that Naruto decided to be a little wary until they got to know one another. He seemed cool, though, and the way he had teased Dog-taichou before was kinda neat.

“Uzumaki Naruto!” Naruto exclaimed, bouncing on the spot. This was so, so cool. “Chuunin!” That never got old. “I summon ninken like Kakashi-taichou! I’m pretty good at kicking butt and taking names, pranking people, running and hiding from ANBU… oh, and undercover.”
The fourth guy snorted so hard he almost spat the senbon he was sucking.

Naruto kept grinning, but resolved to take it as a dare. Proctor guy would learn.

“Shiranui Genma,” said proctor guy. “Tokubetsu jounin. Specialties… maa, silent assassination, I guess. I don’t suck at poisons.” He gave off Kakashi-vibes like they had come from the same ANBU unit (someone who smelled like him had occasionally taken a turn on Naruto’s protection squad). “And you, kunoichi-san?”

“A-ano…” The woman hunched her shoulders and gripped the dangling end of her sash in both hands. “I am Katou Kyou. Chuunin. I… uh… that is…”

The Shiranui-guy smiled charmingly and put his hand on her shoulder to calm her down. “It’s okay, Kyou-san. Just take a deep breath.”

The girl stared up at him in surprise, and then her eyes filled with tears. “You’re so kind, Genma-san!” She let go of her belt, reached up to clasp his wrist in both hands, gaze trained on his face, and Naruto almost thought she would kiss him—only she threw him over her shoulder instead.

“The hell?” complained Shiranui-guy, landing smoothly on his feet some ten yards away.

Kakashi-taichou laughed at him. Then he turned to the kunoichi, surveyed her from the standard sandals to the slightly messy dark hair, pausing on her eyes – muddy brown – and the rest of her face – a little too wide to be ‘pretty’. “You haven’t seen her before either,” he mentioned, glancing briefly at Naruto to direct the question. “Was that a spur-of-the-moment thing?”

Naruto shrugged. “No idea. Sorry about this,” he said to Kyou-chan, and popped her with a shuriken.

“The hell?” repeated Shiranui-guy.

Naruto waited until the memories integrated, and then was a little amazed by his clones. They were a bunch of crafty guys with more than a little autonomous creativity. “She was based on Shizune-san, ’cause I thought you probably wouldn’t know her. Didn’t have the time to make something from scratch.” She just made herself less pretty than Shizune-san.

“That was a shadow clone,” Nishi-san concluded. “But with a different shape? That wasn’t a Henge.”

Proof positive that Tsunade wouldn’t have been fooled if Naruto had tried a chakra-based disguise on her.

“Oiroke no Jutsu,” Naruto supplied. “Or, I’ve heard someone call it the Kage Henge. And maybe sorta class it as kinjutsu, but I think he was joking, ‘cause I invented it when I was at the Academy. Huh, did you know that if you keep a shadow clone alive for more than a week, it gets scary independent?”

“We do know now,” deadpanned Kakashi-taichou.

The other two guys just stared.

Naruto cringed. Had he hoped for a good start with his new team?
Hopes dashed.

Chapter End Notes

About Aokabi Nishi. This guy is an OC mentioned in The Hand That Feeds You (the prequel to TYN that I am working on). He was never meant to be at all important. As it so happens, I forgot he wasn’t a canon character. I wrote him into this story in a more major role, and only afterwards realised that I was forcing yet another OC on my readership.

I didn’t feel like this was a reason to go back and rewrite stuff, so please bear with me and my OCs. Cheers!
“Ideally,” mused Dog-taichou-sensei, “we’d get a couple of weeks of team-building milk-runs.” He looked around the mostly empty training field with the broken kusarigama, the two chuunin and the tokubetsu jounin, and shrugged. “But, I think we’re all capable professionals, so I picked up our mission statement. Pack for a month. Be ready to leave by the Western Gate at eight.”

He paused for dramatic effect, and then body-flickered away.

Naruto was torn between the urge to applaud (the dramatic timing was perfect) and roll his eyes (where Iruka-sensei found the patience to live with this guy, he had no idea, but at least it explained why he had so little left for the Academy students and none whatsoever at the Missions Desk).

“On the job training, huh?” grumbled senbon-proctor guy. He moved the senbon from one corner of his mouth to the other and then back. “Kakashi sure hasn’t changed.”

ANBU teammates, Naruto thought. Definitely ANBU teammates.

“I suddenly remember why I prefer my sedate job at the Hospital,” countered Nishi-sensei, outwardly amused but smelling like anger and anxiety. Yeah, if it was his first mission out of the village in a while, he probably wasn’t happy about being away for a month at a few hours’ notice.

Speaking of.

“You know him, right?” Naruto asked senbon guy, remembering how the Wave mission was supposed to take two weeks on the outside, but ended up about twice as long. Sure, a lot of unpredictable stuff had happened, but it always did, didn’t it? “If he says ‘a month’ does he actually mean two months? Three?”

Nishi-sensei went sort of pale.

Senbon guy shrugged. “Who even knows what goes on in that guy’s head? Don’t ask me, kid.”

Naruto nodded. He understood perfectly. It meant that he was on his own and senbon guy wouldn’t give him any special consideration for having less experience in the field. This team was different than a gennin team with a jounin sensei (who was supposed to teach them), but not that different (’cause Kakashi had let them figure things out on their own a lot), and in any case senbon guy wasn’t here to teach Naruto stuff.

That was kinda nice, like they expected Naruto to pull his weight like he was their equal, and treated him that way. But also kinda intimidating. ’cause Naruto loved being a chuunin, but even he had to admit that he really wasn’t at the level of people like Iruka-sensei or Nishi-sensei just yet.

But he’d get there. Quick enough. Believe it!

“You are basing your expectations of all jounin sensei off of Hatake Kakashi…?” Kurenai-sensei said incredulously. Then she dropped her face into her hands and groaned.

Sakura was completely bemused by what was happening. The weird feeling started when dog boy walked up to their jounin sensei and asked to have a sit-down talk with her, and grew as the five current active members of Team Eight (including Sakura) actually sat down on a log and tree stumps
and talked. Openly. About their concerns.

This was like a different dimension. Kurenai-sensei wasn’t even being-

A condescending bitch! inner Sakura filled in with gusto.

Shut up! Sakura ordered herself and tried to suppress the rising blush. ‘Patronising’ was what she was going to say.

“I see,” said Kurenai. “Yes, this makes much more sense. I have to apologise to you, Sakura-chan.”

Sakura had no idea what – the hell! – was going on. She thought she recalled Kakashi-sensei apologising, but only ever sarcastically, or as a part of his oni-act to intimidate them into learning some obscure lesson. Faced with Kurenai’s seemingly genuine kindness, she found she missed the comfortable certainty that her sensei was a nasty, mocking troll.

This was like some of the basic brainwashing techniques she had read about. Give a little kindness where only cruelty can be expected – wasn’t that Conversion for Dummies?

On the other hand, had Kakashi-sensei really successfully trained her to regard kindness from other people as immediately suspicious?

Come to think of it, she was the only one of Team Seven that had to be trained. Sasuke-kun and Naruto had already been doing it before they became genin.

“You’re scaring her again, sensei,” said dog boy.

Kurenai sighed. “Sakura-chan, after what happened with Asuma-sensei’s team, I was convinced that Kakashi had you assigned to me to mess with my team, as some sort of a convoluted revenge plot. We have had a… a difference of opinion recently, and I wouldn’t put it past him.”

Sakura had to admit that it was a fair assessment, except for one little detail. Kakashi-sensei might have been a-

Conniving bastard!

-but his most unforgivable trait was his tendency to be right in the end. And just looking at Kurenai now Sakura could tell that Kakashi-sensei had been right in their argument, too, and that Kurenai was still angry simply because Kakashi-sensei had effortlessly shown her up, absently humiliated her, and didn’t even have the grace to gloat about his victory, like it didn’t matter to him at all.

Whoa. Girl, you’re sure you’re in love with Sasuke-kun? Because right now you sound like you’ve got a huuumongous crush on-

Sakura felt her face going tomato-red.

Kurenai assumed that Sakura was reacting to the accusation, and swiftly moved toward her to put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “I am so sorry. Now I know that Kakashi had you put on my team to mess with me, but you weren’t complicit. This isn’t your fault, Sakura-chan. He simply used you.”

Part of Sakura doubted this interpretation of events. Part was raging at being used like that. And part went: ‘Yeah, but that’s what a good commander does, isn’t it? Uses his subordinates as efficiently as possible.’

Kakashi and Sakura, sitting in a tree!
Shut the fuck up! she mentally screeched at herself.

“Please,” said Kurenai, “don’t feel guilty. He does this to everybody.”

Sakura concentrated on taking deep breaths and letting them out slowly. She doubted this was the last time she had to deal with that particular mess of feelings, but she sort of shoved it all at her inner self to be rehearsed later, so she could function right now.

“Feel angry all you want, though,” added the jounin, smiling wickedly. “We’ll find a way to channel that. How about I start you on some nasty little genjutsu today?”

“Yes, please, Kurenai-sensei.” Sakura wouldn’t let Kurenai use her in her own attempt on revenge against Kakashi-sensei, especially since she already knew that any such attempt would inevitably fail, but there was no harm in using this opportunity to learn.

Someone was willing to teach her. Without any ‘underneath the underneath’ bull.

She was in.

“Great!” exclaimed Kiba, jumping to his feet, echoed by Akamaru’s bark. “Let’s get this show on the road! We can’t get rusty, or Hinata will have our nutsacks!”

Shino fell apart into a buzzing cloud of insects.

Sakura was less grossed out by the things than she was angry at herself for not noticing she had been sitting next to a clone this whole time. She had to get better.

By lunch Iruka had such an itching case of cabin fever that he decided to personally drop by the Academy and deliver the few school reports he had managed to complete (between his two other jobs) instead of sending them with one of the gennin on duty.

He needed to stretch his legs more than he needed to eat. Kimimaro-san was calm, polite and intelligent, but he was also cold, ruthless and genuinely loyal to Orochimaru’s legacy in a way that made Iruka intensely uncomfortable. It was hard to see the hated (baby-killer!) enemy of Konoha through the eyes of someone who had admired and respected him. Loved him, even.

Basically, Iruka needed a breather. And he had a semi-valid reason to make a run to the Academy.

He had deposited his paperwork in Mitsuhara-sensei’s empty office (it was the middle of the class; everyone was hard at work) and was about to trudge back to the Hokage Tower, when the sound of a familiar voice made him pause in the corridor.

“It’s a technique I invented myself!” shouted Konohamaru. “The Oiroke Ja Nai no Jutsu!”

Iruka felt himself blanch. He was already dreading this, but before he forced his reluctant feet to move forward, Daikoku-sensei laughed and cheerfully exclaimed: “Let’s see this, Honourable Grandson!”

Iruka took cover. He knew Naruto; there was no shame in getting to a safe place if one of that hellion’s protégés was in a vengeful pruning mode.

Screaming commenced. Iruka had expected this, so he waited out the worst of it. Once it seemed like most of the victims had run out of breath he squinted – making sure that everything he saw was
somewhat blurred – and glanced through the door into the classroom.

Konohamaru was, Iruka determined despite the deliberate fuzziness of his eyesight, wearing a Henge. Predictably, it was a Henge of a naked woman. Less predictably, said woman was Utatane Koharu-sama.

Iruka closed his eyes again, and muttered a prayer of thanks for his foresight. Looking at that directly might have scarred him for life. As it had, apparently, scarred a class of Academy students and Daikoku-sensei himself. Konohamaru was either a sociopathic genius (Iruka knew the boy well enough to laugh this hypothesis out of court), or had the most rotten luck (meaning that he himself had been subjected to a similar sight, which, owing to the life-long closeness of his Grandfather’s gennin team, was tragically a very real possibility).

Speaking of, going by the sound, Daikoku-sensei was lying on the floor and twitching. Someone should probably go and offer some help before the unsupervised class went wild.

Iruka very seriously considered taking this course of action, and then he decided that his duties unfortunately demanded him back at the Hokage Tower post haste.

Let someone else teach Konohamaru about how violating and just plain wrong it was to use someone’s intimate details like that. Like, for instance, the Grandfather whose carelessness had apparently resulted in this.

x

Sasuke had known that going to the market to buy food carried good chances of running into an Akimichi. He would have preferred it to be any Akimichi but this one, but when had anything ever gone according to his wishes?

“Hey, Sasuke-kun,” said Chouji, lumbering to the produce stand, weighed down by a huge basket of food. He loomed over Sasuke.

“Hn,” Sasuke replied, pretending to be checking the tomatoes for bruises, but mostly just watching from the corner of his eye in case Akimichi would take a swing at him. The rookie might have been big and relatively slow, but he was strong enough that he would have made a punch hurt.

“Got something for you,” said fatso, and offered a letter. Since it was violet and perfumed, there was no doubt about who it had come from. “She wanted to come apologise in person, but she knows you don’t want to see her-”

Good call. Sasuke didn’t want to ever see her again if it could be helped.

“So she sent a letter. You don’t have to read it, or anything, but Shikamaru checked it and said there was nothing too worrying there. She’s really sorry for what happened. Went to the Hokage and spoke on your behalf – said she assaulted you first, and escalated unnecessarily-”

“Lied?” Sasuke interpreted. He put down the tomato and glared at the nosy proprietor who was conspicuously listening to the conversation.

“Not really.” The tub of lard cringed in secondhand embarrassment for his teammate, and decided to leave it at that. “Uhm. So, the food. Hope you enjoy it.”

He set the basket down at Sasuke’s feet.

“Hn,” said Sasuke, and the walking fat-battery must have taken it as acquiesce, because he walked
away with a smile.

Sasuke lugged the thing to the Compound where he chucked it whole into the cesspit. Who even knew what the Akimichi had put into it? That had been a good job on the innocent and regretful routine, but if Sasuke had believed every sympathetic performance ever directed at him, he would be destitute, enslaved and, indeed, dead.

With the letter he was almost tempted – if just to see what Yamanaka had come up with (or, more likely, what Nara had come up with and dictated to her) – but in the end he held the envelope between his index and middle finger, and arranged the rest of his fingers into the Tora seal.

The violet paper was eaten by a little orange flame.

x

“What’s with the get-up, sensei?” asked Naruto, dropping down from a higher roof onto the roof in front of Iruka, who really should have expected it, except that his mind was in a different country (focusing on the details of the treaty to suppress the nightmare he had just escaped from).

“Uh… oh… Naruto…” Iruka put his shuriken back into the pouch with only a little awkward maneuvering and an aborted hiss of pain where his shoulder strap dug into one of the painful abrasions. “Ah, Tsunade-sama gave me an ultimatum for the negotiations with the Land of Rice Fields. It was either full ambassadorial robes or this. You can’t move very well in those robes and there is headgear involved, so… This chafes, but it’s not so bad.”

That was a lie.

Iruka might not have been bleeding right now, but after another day in the armour he would be.

“It’s not supposed to chafe!” Naruto admonished, leaning in closer to check on the buckles.

Iruka shoved him away – gently, but still.

Naruto rolled his eyes. “Eh, it’s basically rip-off ANBU armour with frills on. You’ve got someone that can help you put it on right-

“I’ll ask my colleagues at the Academy whether they aren’t moonlighting in ANBU,” Iruka snarked. He wasn’t going to even touch on the topic of his private life with Naruto around. He was sure it would end with Naruto knowing nigh on everything, and Iruka enduring too much teasing for anyone’s good.

Naruto gave him a comically disappointed look (considering that Iruka was on his way to the Hokage Tower, where he spent most of his time, this was a valid response). “Just ask somebody, yeah? You’ll have welts this way, and spend your days in pain for absolutely no reason. Or is it that you’re embarrassed? If you want, I can ask Kakashi-taichou for you-”

“Let’s not even go there,” Iruka pressed out through clenched teeth. “This wasn’t what you wanted when you came looking for me.”

“I wanted to say goodbye before my mission,” Naruto said dismissively. “That was before I knew you were torturing yourself out of mistaken pride-!”

“I’ll ask, alright?!”

“Promise?”
“Promise,” Iruka replied in self-defence. “Now, about the mission—”

Naruto rolled his eyes. “You already know all the details anyway. Just wish me good luck and don’t forget to take care of yourself, yeah?”

Iruka closed his eyes and smiled into the sunlit afternoon. “Good luck, Naruto.”

Sasuke didn’t feel like cooking. Dinner was bread and cheese and tomatoes.

It stuck in his throat, and he forced it down the same way he forced himself to go through any of the odious duties he had to do as a shinobi. His body needed food, so food it would get.

Eating alone was normal for him, but today it felt terribly dreary. Naruto had sat here, at this table, so recently – the first person after so many years that it had been hard to not forget he was there at the time. Sasuke had had to keep reminding himself. And it had been… good. It had felt good. This was dangerous.

He forced down another small bite. His throat ached.

Naruto was his friend – an actual friend, not just a peer off-handedly affable by default – and they had a kind of a bond now. This was startling. Sasuke hadn’t wanted it. But they had mutual cooperation and a nascent respect, and it would be a lot harder to kill him than Sasuke had imagined.

I could do it, he told himself, taking a bite of a tomato so harshly that red juice sprayed around. It would hurt, but what in life didn’t hurt? As far as he knew the single worthwhile thing in life that did not hurt were tomatoes, and those were the exception that proved the rule.

Anyway, Naruto was leaving for a mission. Who knew how long it would last and when he’d come back and whether Sasuke would still be here in the village? Sasuke wasn’t convinced that the second Naruto was out of the Fire Country Sasuke’s problems wouldn’t mysteriously reappear.

This might have been Sasuke’s last chance to kill Naruto and achieve the next level of the Sharingan… only he couldn’t seem to make himself get up and go do it. What was the urgency? Why did it have to be now? It wasn’t as though Sasuke was otherwise ready to take on that man. He still had years of training ahead of him, but not many, not many-

His knife sank through the cheese and hit the plate hard enough to shatter it. Sasuke stared out of the window at the darkening Compound.

Could he actually kill Naruto? A few weeks ago he would have scoffed at the very question, but now he wasn’t sure about the answer anymore – he had thought Naruto didn’t deserve the promotion to chuunin, but that was because of his personality, not because of any lack of skill, and in the end it turned out that the personality was as genuine as Kakashi’s clownish façade!

But Sasuke… Sasuke had missed some memo somewhere, because he had been genuine all this time. His rage, his oath of revenge, his single-minded pursuit of his stated goals – all of it was genuine.

Oh. Oh. He had been so focused on being an avenger…

…that he completely forgot to be a shinobi.
Gentle hands guided Iruka’s in tightening the armor for the second time in a row. He thought he had it now. It only hurt anymore because of the preexisting welts.

He hated to admit it, but Naruto was right.

“I could leave a shadow clone behind to help you in the morning-”

“Along with half of your chakra?!” Iruka snapped, glaring over his shoulder.

Kakashi was smiling at him, so beatifically that Iruka tried to elbow his side in retaliation. Kakashi dodged, of course, and with a mocking little bow extended his hand with a jar of cream. “I’d offer to spread it on your injuries, too, except-”

“I can do it,” Iruka protested testily.

“You won’t get your back,” Kakashi pointed out.

He was right, of course. Iruka did not have the chakra reserves for a useful, stable shadow clone, and he didn’t want to ask someone else to rub cream into his back. And Kakashi would be gone.

He sighed. “Leave it to me. If it gets worse, I’ll ask Tsunade-sama.” Or her shadow clone – it was all the same to him. “Worry about the shinobi in your care.”

Kakashi’s silence carried the implication that of course Iruka was in his care, and Iruka was a shinobi, and that made him a shinobi in Kakashi’s care. They mutually acknowledged this point, and moved on from it, since Iruka was also a reasonably competent and independent adult person who had his own, separate, mission.

“I know…” Iruka’s breath hitched as Kakashi’s fingers came into contact with one of the more painful bruises. “I know Naruto is not a student anymore-”

“He’s a soldier. My soldier.”

“Yes,” Iruka pressed through clenched teeth, “and that’s what I’m afraid of. Just don’t forget that he’s a rookie – he might not be officially anybody’s student, but he needs guidance.”

Kakashi wiped off his hand on Iruka’s biceps and stepped away. “I can’t teach children. But training ANBU – I can do that.”

Iruka whirled around. “Your team is not ANBU! Naruto especially is not ANBU-”

“Eh, same difference.” Kakashi smiled, closing his eye. “We’ll be fine.”

“I know you will be,” Iruka replied, feeling like the wind was taken from his sails. He subsided and went to shrug on his yukata. The salve was already easing the aches of his body, but the tightness in his stomach wouldn’t go away.

“I know what with the face, sensei?” Kakashi inquired.

Iruka had been looking pale and worn, and there were the ever-present dark circles under his eyes. Sadly, it was a look Kakashi had become used to lately. That was one of the reasons why he had to get this mission over and done with. It was the last step to truly being free of the Hat.

After he returned, hopefully, he and Iruka could go back to their lives.
“You know I always miss you when you’re gone,” Iruka said with a sad attempt at a smile. “And we’ve barely had any time together since… oh kami-sama, since before the Chuunin Exams.”

“I’ll make it up to you when we come back.” Kakashi’s voice sank to lower registers, offering things he sadly couldn’t deliver at the moment.

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep, sempai,” Iruka said, referring to the bedroom voice. He pressed a quick, sad kiss to Kakashi’s mouth through the layer of the mask, and addressed the other subject. “Better a month now then the length of a war later. As long as you do come back. The both of you. Don’t leave me alone in this world, Hatake Kakashi.”

Kakashi left before the pressure became even worse.

Iruka was being odd. It had been a long time since either of them had sustained any grave injuries, and this mission was neither very long nor very dangerous. The histrionics weren’t warranted… except, of course, if Iruka had been thrown off balance by Kakashi’s temper tantrum about Jiraiya’s requisitioning of Naruto.

Circles within circles – underneath the underneath. People were so bloody complicated.

Kakashi stopped on the next roof… and then jumped right back.

Iruka was sitting on the kotatsu, already busying himself with sorting some Academy papers. He looked up when Kakashi’s shadow fell over him.

“You don’t forget things,” Iruka pointed out, invalidating the most obvious excuse before it was out of Kakashi’s mouth.

“Not equipment,” Kakashi admitted. “Other things, sometimes. It’s your job to remind me, kouhai.” He stepped down from the window ledge and pulled Iruka sharply against his chest. “I can either worry you or hide myself from you. You said this was my home-”

“Our home,” Iruka snapped, though it came out muffled, because his face was pressed into Kakashi’s vest, “and I don’t want you to hide your concerns, just as you don’t want me to hide mine. Go, so I can properly worry about you, and then come back to laugh at me.”

This time when Kakashi left, the pressure in his chest wasn’t painful anymore, and he had a spring in his step. Finally, he was going to do something instead of sitting at a table and losing skill to stagnation.

It wasn’t even ten past eight when he joined the rest of his team at the Western Gate.

“You didn’t use to be late to anything above C-rank,” grumbled Genma, looking from his watch to the darkening sky overhead.

“He’s been late for his own death a few times,” opined Nishi-sensei.

“Maa,” Kakashi cut off what was shaping up to be a spirited team-bonding session with him as the shared practice target (there would be time for that later), “there was this hedgehog, and it looked so sad I just had to stop and pet it-”

“No details, please,” Naruto protested, grimacing.

It occurred to Kakashi that he should probably make his excuses a little less transparent now that his team didn’t consist of fresh gennin… on the other hand, who cared? Traumatising Naruto with the
imaginings of the boy’s own perverted mind was just a pleasant bonus.

x

On the next morning, before he shut himself in with the Sound’s representative to hammer out further details of the treaty proposal, Iruka sought out Jiraiya-sama. The man was sitting in a meditation pose in Hokage-sama’s office (although Hokage-sama herself or any shadow clone of hers was nowhere in sight).

Iruka pressed his palms together and bowed. “I’m so sorry, Jiraiya-sama. I severely underestimated Sasuke-kun’s reaction to Team Ten. I have never intended for things to spiral out of control so badly.”

The old man opened one eye and grinned widely, wrinkles regrouping into an expression of mirth. “Good job, Umino.”

“Excuse me?!” Iruka snapped. “I might have doomed one of my students—”

“Not your student anymore.” Jiraiya flapped his hand dismissively. “Doomed? Bah! If anybody doomed that kid it was that idiot Fugaku. No, what you did was hand me the perfect cover story on a platter. Chin up, and welcome to actual espionage, grasshopper.”
“Sasuke.”

“Iruka… sensei,” Sasuke added belatedly. Not out of a lack of respect, but simply because he could not figure out what to correctly call the man. He was a passable teacher for small children – who unexpectedly got drafted as Sharingan no Kakashi’s second in command during his stint as a Hokage.

Sasuke wasn’t sure what to think of Kakashi either. His opinion was almost uniformly negative, except that Sasuke wasn’t stupid, and he noticed that he was thinking exactly what Kakashi wanted him to think. That automatically invalidated Sasuke’s opinion, since it was clearly the result of manipulation. Trying to put together facts about Kakashi was akin to practicing water jutsu – slow, laborious, and invariably leading to disappointment.

So Sasuke didn’t know what to think of Kakashi, and he had even less to go on when it came to Iruka. ‘Sensei’ sounded like the safest honorific.

Iruka-sensei didn’t seem to be offended by the hesitation. That meant nothing. For a man who could be as expressive as the idiot-version of Naruto, Iruka-sensei could also appear to be the exact opposite of what he was.

Sasuke belatedly identified the strange tension in his abdominal muscles as fear. He was – shamefully – frightened of this innocuous man, a chūnin who claimed his sole ambition in life was teaching snot-nosed kids how to do a Henge.

“I have a mission assignment for you,” Iruka-sensei said with seriousness that equalled his speech during the last class before their graduation exam. “The mission rank is A.”

Sasuke felt his jaw drop. He was a gennin. The best he could hope for was B, and never a solo assignment. Unless…

Unless he was being requisitioned by the Seduction Corps.

He shuddered. He couldn’t stop the reaction, no matter how hard he tried. They… Could they? Weren’t Konoha’s Seduction Corps a voluntary assignment? He had always thought…

“Sasuke!” Iruka-sensei was exclaiming and leaping to his feet, while Sasuke turned around, sank onto his knees and emptied his stomach into the wastepaper basket. The shuddering worsened. Tears welled in his eyes.

The Council wanted his genes. It hadn’t worked with the fangirls. Sasuke shouldn’t have told Asuma. Now they knew it wouldn’t ever work, so they came up with something new. Fuck. He had thought he had solved this. He had thought he would walk away from this with another chance.

But, no, they only let him walk out of Psych so they could order him into someone’s bed.

No. He wouldn’t do this. He’d first go missing-

“Breathe, Sasuke-kun,” Iruka-sensei was saying and crouching next to Sasuke, not touching him – Sasuke thought he might have started breaking arms or casting Great Fireballs if the man tried to touch him – like he was experienced with panic attacks. Damn his black, cold heart. Teaching children, wiping noses, wiping arses, and assigning Sasuke straight into strangers’ sheets.
“Why?” Sasuke managed in between dry-heaves.

Iruka blinked at him, like he didn’t have a clue what Sasuke was talking about. “Well, contrary to popular opinion, I am aware that your assignment to Team Ten may have been somewhat… fraught…”

And they waited until Naruto was gone, so Sasuke would have no one to turn to for help.

“…but after you’ve done so well with the A-rank to Wave, I didn’t think a mission outside the village would seem so frightening.”

Sasuke clenched his fists. A part of him wanted to go back in time – back to when that man was the one security Sasuke had ever had, the one surety that someone was forever, always there for him, would keep him safe from any injustice or violence or violation.

“I’m not an idiot,” Sasuke hissed, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “I know what an A-rank solo assignment for a gennin means, sensei-” He was overwhelmed with emotion again (fear or anger or helplessness, whatever that stone in his stomach translated to) to say anything else.

It must have been enough, for Iruka-sensei paled nearly to the color of butter. “Sasuke… Sasuke, I swear this assignment is nothing like that. I shouldn’t have presented it to you like this…” The teacher took a deep breath, steadying himself. “You were requested for this because you’re an Uchiha. There are uses for the Sharingan that we do not advertise, and Kakashi-san is needed where he is presently. Konoha needs you, Uchiha Sasuke – will you deny it?”

That didn’t sound like the sort of assignment Sasuke had been thinking of. Iruka didn’t refute the assumption, though. Sasuke could reach Naruto with a messenger hawk – or, even better, send Asuka – so his mind was still working on the formulation of the letter he would send. Even though Naruto didn’t seem like the type that would get offended by a wrong choice of words, Sasuke couldn’t afford the risk-

“I realise it’s not the nicest thing to learn that you’re wanted for your eyes-”

“Better than being wanted for my…” Sasuke thought he was hardened enough to say it, but his voice failed him at the critical moment. How many witnesses were there to his complete and utter lack of decorum? Were they going to report it? And if not, was it going to become fodder for the rumour mill?

“Please, read the mission statement. I won’t pretend it’s pleasant, but it’s really nothing like you’re imagining.”

Sasuke reluctantly accepted the scroll that spelled out his doom and read it.

And… huh.

Alright, he had not expected this.

x

“Nii-san!” Hinata exclaimed excitedly when she looked up from her reading and found him standing in the doorway of her hospital room.

Writing letters back and forth had been reassuring, and Hinata was grateful for the opportunity to get to know Tenten-chan, but now that Neji-nii-san was here it felt like everything could start to mend. She extended her hand.
He flinched away, but a moment later shook off his hesitation and entered. He briefly paused to observe the flowers with the few kikaichu sentries, but Hinata knew that her team was busy with training right now, and not even Shino-kun would have the attention and chakra to spare on evicting an invited guest from Hinata’s room.

“I am…” Neji-nii-san spoke quietly, “…regretful of my actions toward you.”

Hinata smiled, even though he looked like speaking the words pained him. She was so very glad that he said them despite the pain – not so much because she wanted to hear them, but because it made her happy to know that he forgave her, and that they had a chance of a true understanding now.

“Thank you for coming, nii-san,” she replied. “Chocolate?” She offered the box she received as gift from Naruto-kun. Naruto-kun might have forbidden her from sharing it, but this was a special occasion. She knew – or, at least, hoped – that he would understand.

“No, thank you,” Neji-nii-san said with terribly uncharacteristic demureness.

Was this what he was like now? she wondered. It would take a little getting used to, but in the end the new Neji-nii-san reminded Hinata of herself more than of anyone else, and herself was somebody whom she could understand fairly well.

She stashed the chocolates away and patted the mattress. “Please, sit down and speak with me. What have I missed?” A lot must have happened within the Clan, which Kiba-kun and Shino-kun wouldn’t know, and Father would not mention.

Neji-nii-san did as she requested, although he sat stiffly and spoke stiltedly. “There has been pressure on Hiashi-sama to select Hanabi-sama as the heir, but so far Hiashi-sama refused to make any irreversible decision.”

Hinata nodded. Confirming Hanabi-chan as heir would sentence Hinata to the Caged Bird Seal, and there was no way of taking that back. She was – relieved.

“Following our duel there was also pressure for a betrothal between Hanabi-sama and myself, although as we are biologically half-siblings, Hiashi-sama squashed the idea.”

Hinata reached out, ignored Neji-nii-san’s flinch and put her hand on his elbow. This was relief they could share. She knew that Neji-nii-san would have taken the most diligent care of Hanabi-chan, just as she knew that neither of them could ever have been happy in such a match.

“Then…” He paused and looked down at Hinata’s hand. “Then there was the final stage of the Chuunin Exams, where I was… defeated… by Uzumaki-san.”

Hinata couldn’t deny that she had been waiting for this moment. She wanted to hear about it – but it was unfair to ask for the witness account from her nii-san, for whom the defeat must have been truly shattering, since it resulted in a drastic change of personality. Or, perhaps not so much personality as outlook.

In any case, Neji-nii-san had changed, and the process had not been painless.

“Do you wish to hear about it?” he asked.

Hinata, loathe to lie to him, hung her head in shame and nodded.

“Very well.” He closed his eyes and recounted the fight.
…Neji had not altered his training regimen in deference to the Chuunin Exams. He had been repeatedly assured that his taijutsu exceeded even the most stringent expectations of chuunin rank, and his opposition was pathetic. In fact, there was no opposition at all. The whole spectacle was the exhibition of Neji’s skill for his jailers to envy and hate him for.

“Begin!” bade the Proctor.

Neji loosened his posture, ready to slip into a Juuken stance the instant the caricature of a shinobi standing opposite him attacked. He would take the fight seriously if necessary, of course. He had no qualms about maiming another worthless excuse of a ninja.

“Give up,” he demanded. “You have no chance of winning. Your fate is to—”

“Taijuu Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!”

The arena was suddenly flooded with orange and blue. Neji activated the Byakugan (every orange-and-blue body suddenly became a brightly shining chakra construct, almost painful to view) and began to systematically dispel the clones. “Substantial ones?” he spoke out loud. “Ambitious. But even monstrosity won’t save you from defeat. It is fated. All that you do here is futile. Accept that you will never—”

Wire snapped; tags fluttered through the air; a balloon full of paint exploded in front of Neji’s face.

His eyes burnt; he moulded chakra for a Replacement, but then his ankles clacked together; he fell backwards, hitting his head on the roughly packed dirt and getting stunned by a couple of the tags in close succession.

This… this was not supposed to happen.

He blinked, and blinked, and blinked and blinked and blinked, but the paint was still in his eyes, still burning and interfering with his sight just as badly as the army of chakra constructs was before. His opponent stood above him, and for the first time Neji realised that he could not see him clearly.

“Blah, blah,” said the loser. “Fate? It’s an excuse. Like saying that you didn’t do that to Hinata. That it was going to happen anyway, and you were just the tool in the hands of some higher power. Can’t even take responsibility for your own actions, huh? Pathetic.”

Neji choked. He felt the first stirrings of rage such as he hadn’t allowed himself to feel in years. Living inside a cage meant unceasing rage, but he had painstakingly learnt to control it… No. Mask it. He had learnt to mask it, and the mask had just been cracked by this… this clown.

“What happened to taking charge of your own circumstances?” asked the cretin, squatting by Neji’s side, completely unafraid that Neji would manage to free himself of the wire and snap his neck. “You’re compromising your own goals with how you act toward other people, have you noticed? Like Sasuke. D’you know Sasuke?”

The wire cut deep, through Neji’s skin, into his muscle, but he wasn’t giving up. This was ridiculous. He shook his head at the Proctor.

“Sure you do,” the Uzumaki moron continued prattling. “Everybody knows Sasuke. And everybody knows his self-defeating obsession. Why d’you think nobody’s willing to teach him stuff? He goes ‘round hating everything and everybody and announcing that nothing – including Konoha and his team – matters to him. Why’d anybody want to teach a person like that?”

Uzumaki poked Neji’s shoulder. Neji snapped his teeth at him.
“So, like, why’d anybody want to teach a person like you? You’re so strong that a bunch of people musta been interested, I’m sure… But d’you think anyone will want to work with you if you insult them? Or if you threaten to use your skills against them?”

They were jealous! The entire Clan was full of people who obediently bowed their backs to be trodden on by Hiashi-sama’s immediate family, because they would rather hate silently and inefficiently than get up and do something to help themselves! And if not help themselves, then at least get back at their Masters.

Neji was the only one who managed something more. And now they all resented him for being better than them. They could choke on it. They could all choke.

Uzumaki rocked on his toes. “This thing you do – you and Sasuke both – when you act like your suffering is somehow admirable… it’s not. The admirable things about you could be stuff like strength and perseverance and… I dunno…” He gestured widely with his hands. “…like when you figured out your clan techniques all by yourself, that is awesome. People said so! I heard them! They noticed!” He sighed and gave Neji an absurdly chastising look. “But they also noticed that you put Hinata into the Hospital even though you were so much stronger than her that you absolutely didn’t have to even really hurt her to win.”

Neji did not have to, that was true. But he could. He could – and it had felt good.

“And why? ‘cause she’s nice?”

“She is weak!” Neji spat bloody saliva from where he had bitten the inside of his cheek in his vain struggle against the wire.

Uzumaki stood up; his shadow fell over Neji’s face. “And now, so are you. Weak. Helpless.” He transformed into a perfect likeness of Neji. “Ne, Hyuuga Neji. Look, here’s a weak person. Whatcha gonna do about it?”

And Neji, looking into his own expressionless face, knew what was going to happen to him. He closed his paint-filled eyes even before the blow rendered him unconscious.

…Hinata found herself biting the inside of her cheek, too, as Neji-nii-san finished his retelling. She wished she could alleviate some of that pain – but she had wished so for years, and nothing had ever helped. Nothing, not even Neji-nii-san beating her within an inch of death.

“He did not hurt me to win,” Neji-nii-san added quietly. “It took me some time to come to terms with what that implied.”

From his story, Hinata understood which implication he meant – that Naruto-kun was so much stronger, or at least so much smarter than Neji-nii-san. She did not think that was necessarily true. Just… Naruto-kun had more freedom to grow, to stretch his mind in directions that were closed off to the children of the Hyuuga Clan, whether they were caged by duty or by a seal.

“Naruto-kun is…” Hinata spoke tentatively, and then paused. She had run out of words. At least, she had run out of words that were not far too embarrassing to say out loud.

But Neji-nii-san nodded in agreement anyway.

x

“Are you injured, Umino?” asked Tsunade-sama’s clone when Iruka winced sitting down.
“N-no, Hokage-sama-”

“You should have practiced that lie some more,” remarked the clone and moved closer. Tsunade-sama’s nose wrinkled. “At least you’re taking care of it. Well, if you won’t tell, do show.”

Iruka stared at her.

“Embarrassed about a sex injury? I don’t judge. Much.”

Iruka barely managed to stave off the vasodilation in his face. “No, Hokage-sama.”

She put one hand on her hip and gestured at him with the other. “I’m waiting, Umino. Off with that. Or I’ll dispel and—”

“No need for threats, Hokage-sama…” Iruka grumbled and obediently started pulling off his armor. A surreptitious check of the clock confirmed that Kimimaro-san was not expected for another hour yet; Hokage-sama and Iruka were supposed to use this time to go over his progress and troubleshoot. Apparently, troubleshooting now included an impromptu medical exam of Iruka.

He pulled his mesh shirt over his head – but really only because the woman frightened him.

“This is a bad joke,” she muttered at his back. “What are you using for it?”

Iruka pulled the jar out of his pouch and handed it over.

“I should have ordered you into the ceremonial robes. But now you’ll just look like an idiot who can’t wear armor properly if you switch.” There was some more mumbling, but it must have been in a different language, because even Iruka’s ears couldn’t parse it.

Cold hands touched him; there was some pushing and pulling, and a brief use of healing chakra on the worst two spots, and then Iruka found himself subjected to the worst horror: Tsunade-sama was putting the salve on his back. This was… this was a new low. Iruka wished the floor would open and swallow him.

“Tanuki will show you how to put it back on correctly—”

“No need, Hokage-sama,” Iruka replied. The contrary floor still wasn’t swallowing him. “I’ve already had someone show me. I apologise for the inconvenience.”

“You’re ten years too old to be this ingenuous, Umino,” she muttered at the back of Iruka’s head. “Don’t let it happen again.”

“I won’t, Hokage-sama.” He wouldn’t. Naruto was right; he had been stupid, and this encounter just compounded it for him. Never again.

The shadow clone harrumphed. “And, Tanuki— if I hear a whisper of this on the grapevine, the next mask you’ll wear will be the wiring holding the shards of your jaw together.”

“Yes, Hokage-sama,” replied the shadow in the corner of the room.

Iruka had known that the man was there because he had heard him breathe, so he wasn’t startled; he was simply further mortified (and wholeheartedly grateful to Godaime-sama for issuing the threat to protect his reputation).

“Wipe that look off your face,” Tsunade-sama snapped at him. “I just like the rumours that you used to be an ANBU.”
Iruka’s head whipped around to stare at her. “What rumours…?”

She smirked. “Haven’t you heard? Urban legend says you were the youngest ANBU ever recruited!”

Iruka clenched his jaw very tight. This had a very familiar feel.

Naruto wasn’t likely to repeat a prank he had regretted (his reaction when he found out that he might have put Iruka into real danger by claiming that he was a Hokage candidate pretty much guaranteed that), but that wouldn’t have stopped Konohamaru and his retinue.

Iruka sighed and closed his eyes in defeat.

His own mesh shirt hit him in the face.

“Put your clothes on, Umino – I appreciate a show, but we’ve got work to do here.”

Kakashi-taichou’s approach to team-building was predictable.

He mocked every team member in front of his comrades individually, then pissed them off as a group, and then gave them a thought problem to solve while scouting the road ahead.

They were still in Fire territory, but even Naruto admitted that the best time to attack a Fire team would be in Fire territory, because they weren’t expecting it there. So they expected it. Underneath the underneath again. That’s why Juuji and Annai were running guard on the side of the road that wasn’t guarded by a river.

“He really likes it when his team hates him, huh?” mused Naruto.

“I thought that was just how he was naturally,” opined Nishi-sensei who, Naruto had recently found out, was still living with his mother after a string of failed relationships that led him to the firm decision to focus on his career instead of trying to start a family.

“Both,” assured them senbon guy. “He likes miles and miles of emotional distance in a team. This way it won’t bother him so much if we all die.”

“How likely is that?” asked Nishi-sensei, looking perturbed.

Cool word, perturbed. It described exactly the face Nishi-sensei was making. Also, unperturbed described senbon guy’s face pretty good.

“On this mission, not very,” said senbon guy. He looked sideways at Naruto; his eyes narrowed. “I’d say the chances were low, bordering on negligible. Unless we run into a bunch of S-class nin.”

“And how likely is that?” inquired Nishi-sensei, moving from perturbation to sarcasm.

“In the Land of Rivers? Nah. If we went to, hmm, Grass… maybe.”

Naruto remembered watching the fight against Orochimaru from an almost safe distance. He didn’t think he was ready to go up against an S-class nin yet, and the way Nishi-sensei paled a little suggested that they agreed on this point.

“Oh,” grumbled senbon guy, eyes moving over the forest to their right, “don’t start panicking now. Kakashi wouldn’t have taken you on this mission if he didn’t think you had the necessary skill and
Skill? Naruto might have been promoted to chuunin, but he was only on Kakashi’s team because Kakashi had pissed off Iruka-sensei by giving Naruto Iruka-sensei’s kid picture. This was retribution. It wasn’t like Dog-sensei wanted him here. And experience?

“I’ve only done three A-ranks so far—”

“How long have you been a chuunin?” Nishi-sensei cut in.

Naruto’s face screwed up as he counted. “Three weeks now.” Huh. It seemed like so much longer. Those were real busy three weeks.

“Ah,” said Nishi-sensei with an iryounin-typical smile. Lots of the medics wore that smile, especially around wounded ninja. “I see.”

Naruto didn’t see. He would have thought that sharing this information about one another was part of the deal— as new teammates they were supposed to be getting to know one another, weren’t they? Or was this just history repeating itself, and Naruto once again accepted only because they had been ordered to accept him? Was that why senbon guy wouldn’t look at him except for those little out-of-the-corner-of-his-eye glances, like he was checking if Naruto wasn’t about to try and bite somebody innocent?

Was that why Nishi-sensei ran inside a cloud of anxiousness?

Naruto let himself fall behind the two of them. He kept his eyes on the road and on the river, trusting his dog-siblings to alert him if anything was coming from the right.

After a while senbon guy spoke to Nishi-sensei: “Out of curiosity, same stats for you?”

“Nineteen years,” said the medic dryly. “Zero.”

Senbon guy snorted. “ Didn’t let you out of the Hospital?”

“Apparently, I am handy with a scalpel.”

Naruto heard the threat in that sentence loud and clear. Senbon guy was not stupid enough to continue teasing Nishi-sensei about his lack of field experience now that he knew it might have resulted in unasked-for field surgery.

Nishi-sensei continued worrying so much that he was making Naruto nervous, too.

Naruto himself just ran on as instructed, hopes for this new team sinking lower. He could already see that it would take him months and months to get these older, more experienced people to even take him seriously, and that the meantime would be a little more civil, but not actually any friendlier than the start of Team Seven.

Kimimaro-san took his leave with a bow far shallower than Iruka’s – not intended as any sort of slight, simply due to his medical condition – and Iruka moved back to the desk to arrange the papers and write down a few notes he hadn’t wanted to make in front of the Sound ninja.

Just as he finished a summary of today’s relevant points, the door behind him opened again; he heard Hokage-sama’s Kage Bunshin enter and approach.
“You’ve worn Kaguya out,” she remarked.

Iruka stood and presented his report. “I am trying to be understanding of his frail health while not being swayed by disproportionate sympathy; but if I must err, it shall be on the side that benefits Konoha.”

The clone grinned for an instant, before the expression was muted to a smirk. “Sit.”

Iruka frowned. He had plans for this evening. Plans that did not involve getting a head start on tomorrow’s work-

“You’re not going back to the Academy yet, Umino.”

He didn’t even ask how she knew about his intention to drop by the Academy and do some real, honest work for a few hours. Even if it was just marking. He needed to lift his spirits, and what better way than to remind himself of why he was sloughing through this diplomatic mire? It was all for the children.

“But-

“I know you can do twice the work of anybody else,” Hokage-sama interrupted him, “but I need you well-rested for this. We might be coming into this negotiation from a position of power, but that doesn’t give us room for mistakes. Orochimaru wouldn’t have made an idiot his second in command.”

“I… I wouldn’t neglect my duties-”

“You nearly drove yourself to the brink of exhaustion for a month doing the work of half a dozen people. Don’t tell me you’re back at hundred percent a week later – I’ve got eyes. Rest, so I don’t have to worry about your mind being clouded with exhaustion.”

“Yes, Hokage-sama,” Iruka said mechanically.

“You learn that hangdog expression from Hatake’s ninken?”

“No, Hokage-sama.” He might have gritted his teeth a little too audibly this time.

“Don’t pout at me. Any further problems with your armour?”

“No Hokage-sama.” Now she was just making fun of him. “If that’s all, I’d like to go over these proposed export taxes-”

“That’s what tomorrow is for. You’re going home, taking a hot bath, brewing a pot of tea and sitting down with one of those brainless books Hatake always totes about. Medic’s orders.”

Iruka rather thought that the clone could put its supposed ‘medic’s orders’ up somewhere unmentionable, but Tsunade-sama was still his Hokage and… there were worse orders than to relax for one evening.

x

It was fairly usual for a date between two shinobi to turn into a spar – what easier way to transition from socialising to bed, right?

Kurenai and Asuma were a little past that stage, so they typically skipped the sparring and went to Kurenai’s apartment. Asuma lived in the Sarutobi Clan House, which was beautiful and had all sorts
of amenities, but private it was not. After one late morning encounter with the Sandaime on her trip from the bathroom to Asuma’s bedroom, Kurenai declared that it was her place or nothing.

While they had a lot of experience with sparring, tonight was the first time their date had turned into a plotting session.

It was almost romantic, under the dim red light of the stylised lantern over their table, with the ikebana (promising in hanakotoba passionate devotion under the shadow of death) serving as table decoration.

Kurenai had shared her success with Sakura-chan.

Asuma had shared the as-of-yet unofficial info that the last Uchiha was being transferred off his team.

They had both breathed a sigh of relief over their second glasses of cocktail, and then retreated into the most shadowed corner of their box. Kurenai preferred this ‘romantic’ establishment for the simple reason that most of their social circle did not, and thus they were unlikely to meet anyone they knew. For instance, the only way Anko would be caught here was with an armful of primed explosive tags.

“I’m going to make him regret he ever thought of this plot,” Kurenai stated once her glass was empty.

Asuma choked on his last sip. “I love you, but I think you might be overestimating yourself. Or underestimating him.”

She looked around and pegged the two actual kunoichi among the customers (aside from herself). One was on duty; the other was simply having fun toying with the woman (civilian, married) seated opposite her. She tried to make a similar analysis of the men, but that had always come harder to her. Was she prone to underestimating male shinobi? Perhaps, but if so then only because she had to offset the default overestimation propagated by their entire society.

She wasn’t going to accept another jounin as her superior simply because his genitals hung out.

“You just continue being a chicken, Asuma.” She signalled for the cheque. “I’m going to be the best sensei Sakura-chan has ever had, and send her out into the world with a few tricks up her sleeves that will give even Kakashi a pause.”

Asuma didn’t bother to hide his skepticism (on one hand it made her happy, because it meant that he wasn’t putting on a show for her anymore; on the other hand, wasn’t he supposed to be on her side?). “You’ve got how long to pull this off again?”

“I have Sakura-chan for a month, officially,” she said, even though she knew that he knew this, and was only dragging it out of her due to the mistaken impression that she had not taken the time constraint into account. “But for this cause I am perfectly happy to continue privately tutoring her even after she is no longer a member of my team.”

Asuma didn’t say anything. He paid the waitress that came with their cheque – it was his turn tonight, since Kurenai had paid last time.

“You’re just going to let it go?” she demanded as they moved out into the night street. “Hatake Kakashi messed with your team, but it’s okay, because getting back at him would be too much work?”

Asuma finished lighting his cigarette. He blew out a ring of smoke in a motion eerily reminiscent of
his Father, and then shook his head: “…I’m not sure it was Kakashi, actually.”

“Who else?”


“Who?” Kurenai demanded.

Knowing he was annoying her – and happy about it – he simply grinned. “I’m going to ask him.”

And that was it.

Kurenai decided that, of course, he was entitled to playing his games with her and keeping things that affected her team secret. He was. That was his prerogative.

But Kurenai was perfectly entitled to slamming her door in his face and going to bed alone.

They reached the borderlands just as dawn broke over the horizon – a very different horizon than Naruto was used to.

They stopped for breakfast; Kakashi-taichou told them they had ten minutes before they were on the way again. Not time enough to brew tea or even boil water for instant ramen. Just barely enough to force down a ration bar and re-fill their water bags.

Naruto fed Juuji and Annai and then plopped down between them on the ground, chewing the hard, bittersweet stuff.

This wasn’t anything like Tsunade-retrieval. It wasn’t anything like discovering a missing nin in the village (that only originally counted as a B-rank, until the T&I people found that there was a whole invasion planned and Iruka got spitting mad for how narrowly Konoha had averted a disaster and made it an A-rank mostly so he could yell at the ANBU that a gennin had to do their jobs for them).

The closest he had ever come before to this kind of mission was in Wave.

He stared upwards at the tall, bald peaks of the towering mountains, and felt very tiny and weak.

Wave… He had been so sure that he was ready to be a shinobi, that he could take whatever the world would throw at him. And he had run headfirst into – into an epiphany. Haku-san, he thought. No, that didn’t feel right. Haku. They had been too close for honorifics. They had touched each other’s heart – Naruto was sure of that. Touched, so clumsily that both their hearts broke in the aftermath, only Haku’s did so literally, too, rent apart by Dog’s Chidori.

Ya-san had spoken to him later, at length, agreeing with Naruto’s decision to not lean on Rikku in his grief. Ya-san taught him the word ‘epiphany’ too – it was a great word for what Haku had come to mean to Naruto.

“You’re going to do fine,” Nishi-sensei assured him.

Naruto nodded at him, smiling a mute thanks for the support. He didn’t doubt that they would succeed at their assignment, and this time it wasn’t the naïve self-assurance of a child, but a true confidence in the strength of his team.

Just like Team Seven: even though they didn’t like him, when the time came, they would fight by his
“What do you mean, gone?!”

Tsunade knew that Asuma wasn’t the shouting type, so this exclamation went a long way in convincing her that he was truly clueless.

Nara stared out of the window at the damn clouds, like they weren’t having an emergency here. He absently twirled a kunai in his fingers; in the handful of days Tsunade had interacted with him she had seen him twirl all sorts of things, starting with chopsticks and ending with, interestingly enough, a leek. Where the hell had he gotten that?

“I mean,” Tsunade said, seriously contemplating just throwing the Hat at the nearest person and running as fast and as far as her feet could carry her (which was very fast and very far), “that I’ve got a dead ANBU, and sealed-off Compound inside the village that not even our best fuuinjutsu users can access, and a ticking time bomb of a gennin with a practically extinct fucking doujutsu disappeared into the night!”

She was shouting, too. She felt it was warranted.

What the fuck kind of a leaking barge did Hiruzen-sensei leave for her?

“Wait,” someone said in the hallway outside her office, “Uchiha Sasuke? You mean he’s gone missing?”

“I’m not even surprised,” replied another voice. “After that-”

And then they were gone out of earshot – on their merry way to spread this information to the whole damn village. Within an hour everybody who was at all connected (and that was pretty much everybody, because they were goddamn ninja) would have heard.

Uchiha Sasuke? The last loyal Uchiha? Ha! So last week.

“Sarutobi,” Tsunade said at a somewhat more manageable volume (the steady intake of sake helped with maintaining equanimity), “Hatake’s not here for me to beat into a bloody pulp. You better find me the person responsible for this shitshow, or I’ll happily use you as the substitute.”

As far as she knew, Uchiha had attended two team training sessions with Sarutobi – for a given value of ‘attended’. The first one had blown up within minutes. He had been picked up from the second one by ANBU, and transported directly to a psychiatric facility.

Apparently, this wasn’t enough of a warning to do anything but put an ANBU guard on the boy because no way would that stress him further – maybe enough that he would do something stupid.

Fuck. If it was her, she would have been gone into the night so fast. So fast. Good on the boy, thought Senju Tsunade.

“Get him back. Unharmed!” ordered the Godaime Hokage, who was, as far as she was concerned, a completely different person. And, because Shimura was already turning to her and opening his mouth with what would be a very smooth and uncompromising plan, she added: “Nara, take care of this. No Hunters, no ANBU. And I want a full investigation of the dead one-”

“Shouldn’t we be focusing on the murderer instead of the victim?” suggested Utatane.
Tsunade glared at her. “A gennin murdered an ANBU, huh? It must not have been a competent ANBU then? Or was it that your precious prodigious Uchiha is already so advanced-”

“Excuse me?” the old bat hissed stiffly.

“Excuse denied,” Tsunade snapped, out of patience with their bullshit. “That boy is a gennin, and if somebody murdered the ANBU that was supposed to guard him-” She wanted to see who gave that order, and make them eat the scroll it was written on! “-we’re looking at a possible abduction. I find it unfunny that you sing the boy’s praises with one breath and with another assume that he’s betrayed Konoha. Make up your mind!”

“If I may-”

“Not now, Shimura! Gennin are out of your purview. Speaking of, get me your wife, Nara; I want her on this one. Tell her she can pick her team. One rule: no facial masks.” Nara Yoshino, Tsunade was given to understand, did things her way, and kami help whoever dared disagree.

She was exactly what Uchiha needed (aside from a long trip away from the village so he could learn how to breathe, but, alas, not with those eyes). She was also the perfect deterrent to Shimura’s incessant need to put his Root puppets into every operation (why Hiruzen-sensei hadn’t had the man discreetly **put to sleep** ages ago she’d never understand).

“Ah, Hokage-sama?” asked Sarutobi, and damn if he wasn’t squashing a grin.

Tsunade gave him three seconds to explain himself before he would have to do it from a hole in the wall she made **with his head**.

“I have a name for you,” he said with disturbing eagerness. “It’s Umino Iruka.”
The door flew open, crashed into the wall, and an enraged female voice bellowed: “Umino!”

Iruka turned from Hokage-sama’s calm and amused shadow clone to Hokage-sama’s wrathful true self. And back.

His bemusement must have been communicated clearly enough, because the shadow clone made a hand-sign (unfamiliar to Iruka), and suddenly the amount of killing intent in the conference room halved.

“I must be overusing that jutsu,” Tsunade-sama hissed, glaring at her clone, which glared back at her with the air of one making a concession, “because I could swear I’m not integrating all the memories anymore.”

Iruka blinked and stood up from the chair in concern. He knew from Naruto that up from a certain number of Kage Bunshin the memories became hazier and disjointed, until finally they would not come to the ninja at all. He had not expected Tsunade-sama to have the chakra reserves for such a large number of clones, but perhaps the memory corruption started at a lower level for those with less chakra.

In any case, the amount of work she had to be doing to get to such a state was worrying. “Please be careful with your health,” he said, offering his chair.

Hokage-sama scoffed at him and waved her hand, clearly indicating that Iruka’s concern was unnecessary and unwelcome.

She took Kimimaro-san’s vacant seat instead, rested her elbows on the desk and laced her fingers so she could set her chin on top of them. She pinned Iruka with an ice-cold, gimlet stare. “Uchiha Sasuke. Start talking, Umino.”

Sasuke arrived within sight of Fujino-Cho and set up a makeshift camp. He had no idea how long it would take before his mission commander arrived.

Since he had received no useful information whatsoever from Iruka-sensei, there was no point to fretting about the parameters of his mission. He did not like it, that was a given – but it was looking increasingly likely that this mission had nothing whatsoever to do with his genes. And propagation thereof.

He was glad no one saw his relief at this turn of events (even camping in mud for a year was better than an involuntary night in somebody’s bed).

Asuka, naturally, was of the opposite opinion. “More isolation,” she muttered dryly, “exactly what you need, egg-yolk. But at least somebody’s finally giving you something useful to do.”

Useful to them, perhaps. Useful to Sasuke? Che, right. “This just continues the trend of sabotaging my training. I’m surprised they even let me walk out of the village.”

“They did more than that. We still don’t know who killed the guard, but I don’t suppose anyone would consider you innocent until proven guilty.”

Gnaw Off Your Leg
So, Sasuke noted, watching the few travelers trickling along the road to the town, laden with bags or dragging carts, this was the life of a missing nin. It didn’t seem so difficult. At least until the time came for him to find paying work.

Should he even wait for his contact and scope out the mission before he cut ties completely?

“Take first watch,” he snapped. The warm sunlight made his eyes itch and close.

“I liked Mizuki better,” Asuka snapped back, but at least this time she didn’t attack him with her bill.

“Mizuki was a traitor,” Sasuke pointed out.

“Because what you’re intending isn’t treason?”

“Maybe nobody will come,” Sasuke muttered. He closed his eyes and decided to wait until noon before moving on. He might try and meet with Naruto, but then again, he might not. Naruto had more reasons than most to hate Konoha, but he seemed to form ties to Konoha’s people that would prevent him from ever truly leaving.

Sakura was… numb.

She wished she could be angry, or heartbroken, or anything at all, but there was nothing inside her when she thought of Sasuke-kun. She suspected the inner Sakura had soaked it all up; it must have been all bad, and explosive, and absolutely socially unacceptable, so of course it went to Inner.

Sakura missed it now.

But, with that problem shelved rather than solved (oh, it would come back one day, likely as not in the form of a bloody murder, hopefully not Sasuke-kun’s) she focused on the next terrible roadblock on her own road of life. And, for goodness’ sake, had she just used that wording?

*You could try not lying to yourself for a change,* suggested Inner.

*You could try shutting up for a change,* she thought at herself, approaching the unexpectedly intimidating door of the florist’s. She hadn’t come here… in more than a year. Her friendship with Ino was all messed up – were they even friends at all anymore?

She hoped.

She stepped under the arch and walked into the shop. Ino was leaning against the counter, reading a scroll. As she noticed the incomer, she put her reading down and stood up with a shallow customer-service smile plastered on her face, opened her mouth to call out a greeting-

And spotted Sakura.

The smile slipped away.

Sakura took a deep breath. “Ino…”

“Hi, Sakura,” said her friend, and she must have still been her friend, or she wouldn’t have spoken with such un guarded sympathy.

Sakura wanted to throw herself at Ino and demand a hug, but her feet seemed grown into the floor in between the tubs of multicoloured freesias and indigo irises, and all she managed to say was: “Uh…”
Ino rolled her eyes. “Yes, I know, I’m supposed to insult you here and laugh as you beg me for help with whatever it is you need help with… can we skip it today?”

Sakura slumped in relief. Her fringe fell over her eyes like a curtain and hid the curious gaze she directed at her friend. “I’m not the only one, huh?”

Ino, too, looked like she had been crying. And possibly like she had been sick lately, except that Sakura liked to believe she would have known if anything serious had happened to Ino. If for no other reason than because, up until his disappearance, Ino had been Sasuke-kun’s teammate.

Sakura let herself be pulled over and pushed down to sit on a bench.

“I didn’t expect this,” Ino said after a while of uncomfortable silence between them. “I thought that if you came at all, it would be with accusations. How I… how I drove him away-”

“What?!” Sakura screeched. She was free to screech now, after all. Sasuke-kun’s threat was obsolete.

The way Ino flinched, though…

Yeah, maybe we should try to stop for good, regardless of Sasuke-kun.

“Sorry,” Sakura forced out. She took a deep breath and braced herself. “Ino, I… Before, at the Academy, I never thought about Sasuke-kun’s feelings. None of us did. We only ever thought about our own feelings. And of course I was excited to be on a team with him, but he never seemed happy. I guess I didn’t understand until I saw him when Kakashi-sensei told him he was reassigned to your team.”

That had been difficult to say. But now that it was out, Sakura felt a little lighter.

Ino glared at her. “Was he angry?”

And this, this was the bitterest part. Sakura shook her head. “No, he wasn’t angry.” She swallowed. She didn’t realise it at that time, but in hindsight it was obvious. “He was scared.”

Ino was not surprised. She must have already suspected as much. Huh. She had always been smarter about people than Sakura. Sakura was the book-smart one.

“But,” Sakura soldiered on, “that isn’t on you. We were stupid, yes, but it wasn’t me who drove Sasuke-kun away, and it wasn’t you either. Just… think back, think on everything that happened to him in Konoha… that was allowed to happen to him in Konoha…”

Ino’s eyes widened. She nodded. And then nodded again as the pieces began to fit together. “When did you figure this out?”

Sakura shrugged. She would have loved to leave it at that, but she had hopes for re-connecting with Ino, and didn’t want to start out with a lie. “Naruto clued me in.”

“The idiot?” This time Ino was surprised.

Sakura groaned and pressed her forehead to her knees. “I have no idea! He just… knows things. Does things. Looks totally stupid most of the time, but he tricked Tsunade-sama! They promoted him to chuunin! I don’t knowoow…”

“Huh.” Ino took the spot next to her on the bench and bumped their shoulders together. “I feel like
we should sit him down with Shikamaru, give them a common objective, and watch how many people in the vicinity lose their will to live.”

Sakura lifted her head and tried to smile. “Ne…”

“Oh,” Ino remembered, “you wanted help with something. Is this an ice cream and tissues discussion, or can we go get some of that fudge from that one vendor…?”

Sakura actually had no idea. “Have you ever had a crush on someone totally inappropriate? Like, you actually really dislike that person, but you still blush and your stomach goes all fluttery and you want to stab yourself in the eye with a kunai every time you think about them?”

Hilarity flashed through Ino’s face before a sympathetic expression settled on it. “Let’s go get the fudge.”

Sasuke’s mission commander turned out to be Jiraiya of the Sannin.

Sasuke had not expected this. Of course he had learnt about the Sage at the Academy, and of course he had heard a multitude of increasingly unflattering rumours, but the grotesque introduction – Kabuki pose, self-declaration as a proud ‘super-pervert’ – told him more than that.

Jiraiya, like Kakashi, was a clown. He was a shinobi of such skill and such reputation that he did not feel compelled to present himself seriously to the world. He treated everything like a giant joke.

Sasuke had had enough of being the butt of people’s jokes.

“You killed the ANBU,” Sasuke pointed out.

The Sage blinked with such exaggerated innocence that it turned Sasuke’s stomach. “ANBU…? Oh, you mean that illegal Root operative with explicit orders to abduct you into a black ops black hole if he could do it without witnesses?”

And that was it. That was it. Regardless of whether this half-missing nin was telling the truth or just using a terrifyingly plausible lie to manipulate him, Sasuke was never going back to that village. He was shocked he had managed to get away this time – and suspected that he had had a lot of help, from other people than just Jiraiya and Iruka (and probably Naruto, because it was becoming increasingly obvious that Naruto had his fingers, or at least his nose, in everything).

The old man sighed, dropped the droll poise, and squatted in the shadow of the birch next to Sasuke. “Look, kid. I get that you’ve got your own agenda. And after a while nobody will be guarding you here. If you do a runner, we’ll find out two weeks later when we rely on the fact that we have an operative here and discover that we don’t.” He shrugged, looking into the distance to emphasise how much he didn’t care. “We’re good at our jobs, so the chances one of us would die as a result are low, I grant you that.”

Sasuke clenched his jaw. He didn’t expect Jiraiya to look through him so easily. Even though he knew that the clownishness was just a façade. Jiraiya was far too similar to Naruto in many aspects, come to think of it, and Naruto had proved that there was a lot under the surface that Sasuke had never bothered to see or understand. And with Naruto that had turned out to be a mistake.

Of all the people in Konoha, in hindsight Naruto was one of the least… objectionable ones. Damned with faint praise as that made him.
This Sage was a Kage-level shinobi whose mere name frightened enemies, and by his own admission also the head of Konoha’s spy network – of course he was full of tricks. Tricks that he refused to teach. But tricks that could, perhaps, be learnt… if Sasuke didn’t squander his chance to observe.

Was it worth it? Could he afford to remain still for who knew how long, while *that man* roamed the Elemental Countries freely?

“So,” Jiraiya said just as Sasuke asked himself the key question, “I will give you a bit of incentive to stay and make something of yourself other than a dirty deserter.”

Sasuke scowled sideways at him. He hadn’t asked for any moral judgments. And certainly not from one of the people party to the oppression of his Clan, back when there was a Clan.

The Sage jauntily hopped to his feet and grinned, mean and a little intimidating: “I am going to offer you this: I will pass to you any reliable intelligence on Uchiha Itachi’s location that crosses my way.”

“Why would you do that?” Sasuke demanded. He hadn’t even decided to leave yet. He was sure he would survive going missing, but how long would it take him to gather the resources he would need to do more than *survive*? To grow and train and build his strength? Despite everything that made him hate the place, he had had good reasons to remain a Konoha ninja for this long.

“Interesting question,” acknowledged Jiraiya. “That has an interesting answer. You may guess. If you guess correctly, I will confirm.”

x

Annai broke the tree line and fell into step with Naruto.

Nishi-sensei was the only one who reacted at all, and even he aborted the motion well before his hand reached his senbon.

“Bear, nii-chan,” Annai reported. “Huuuge!”

Land of Rivers was a lot different from the places Naruto knew. In Fire the main roads twisted left and right around hills, and if there ever were any slopes, they were gentle. Paths followed rivers, and dodged around the steep cliffs.

Land of Waves was basically just bits of dirt sticking out of the ocean.

Land of Rives went up and up and up and then down and down and down. There were no plains to speak of, everything was mountains and valleys and sharp inclines with trees used to inhospitable conditions. And, apparently, bears.

“Dinner, taichou?” inquired Naruto.

Annai focused her best puppy dog eyes at Kakashi’s back. Sadly, he didn’t look back to appreciate their full power, so he simply replied: “Maa, if you can skin while running, Naruto…?”

“Slave-driver,” grumbled Annai, crestfallen at the dissolving vision of a belly full of bear meat.

“Lead the way,” Naruto bade and followed his huntmate through the thickening undergrowth toward an old, hollow tree with the tell-tale buzz of bees and smell of honey surrounding it. Naruto’s nose detected right away that there was just one bear, an old one, and there weren’t any cubs anywhere around.
“Too old to be good to eat,” Annai remarked, trying to convince herself that she wasn’t disappointed.

Naruto was about ready to scare the beast off the way he had seen Iruka-sensei scare off the honey badger, when he noticed the kunai.

It was sticking out of the bear’s back, and there were the ragged remains of a failed tag tied to its ring.

Naruto pulled out a stun tag of his own.

Five minutes later he caught up to his mission leader and offered the kunai-plus-tag for inspection, saying grimly: “Someone wants us to think Suna shinobi are hunting in these parts. It doesn’t even make sense, but we should be ready for sabotage.”

He felt senbon guy staring at him, but pretended he didn’t. The only reaction he was interested in right now was Dog-taichou’s.

Kakashi barely slowed down to stash the evidence in a storage seal, and then flashed a few hand-signs at senbon guy, who grabbed Nishi-sensei by the elbow and dragged him off the road.

“As expected,” said taichou, flashing an eye-smile in Naruto’s direction. “First partial objective: find who wants us to declare war on Sand so desperately they would try this gambit.”

x

Shikamaru had a new pet project. He had a lot of those, because not having one made him antsy, and he ended up observing anything and everything and driving himself to distraction with the overabundance of utterly useless input.

So he made it a point to have a few potential projects always prepared for the future moments when he would finish one and need to quickly pick up something else.

After he had been made chuunin (troublesome) and reassigned from Team Ten (pain in the arse, damn it), Chouji fell apart a little. It was a drag, since Chouji was a perfectly capable shinobi on his own, and this stupid notion of the Ino-Shika-Cho codependence had been only in his head. Because their parents had brainwashed it into them, but, oh well.

Then Ino cracked, partly for the same reason, and the rest of the way because she had laid eyes on Uchiha Sasuke again, and just couldn’t stop herself from playing with the headcase’s head.

Shikamaru had wished Sasuke would just sod off.

Looked like some wishes did come true. And he didn’t even have to do anything – Naruto took care of the initial problem that drove Ino to begging at the foot of Shikamaru’s bed (Shikamaru knew that style of chaos as only a long-time observer could – it was pure Phantom of Konoha) and the subsequent problem disappeared with the metaphorical slash across Uchiha’s hitai-ate.

So, both problems solved, Shikamaru needed something new to turn his attention to. And the thing that seemed like he could invest himself in investigating was figuring out the process of becoming a jounin. With the fervent intention of avoiding any of the actions that might result in him getting promoted.

Again.

Pain in the damn arse.
Sasuke sat down at a table at the roadside inn (not even a ryokan, just an overgrown minshuku) and looked around. He started out skeptical, but in the end he could well imagine that a lot of intelligence was surreptitiously exchanged in establishments such as this.

“There, the waitress.” Jiraiya pointed out a mousy-haired woman gathering used dishes from an abandoned table.

She? Was this a joke? She looked like nothing. A slip of a civilian woman, and a homely one at that.

Sasuke gathered chakra to activate his Sharingan, but faster than he could do that – it took him less than a second – Jiraiya had a chakra-suppressing tag slapped against the side of Sasuke’s neck.

“Don’t. You’re undercover. From now on you are Tomio, a boy who left his family to learn a trade, but whose prospective master rejected him. You refused to return home and face your parents and your siblings with the shame of failure… blah blah. You’ll make it up as you go. I prefer to let my agents have some freedom in the construction of their backstories. Whatever fits.”

Sasuke palpated for the paper stuck to his skin. Jiraiya smacked his fingers away – condescending as the action was, at least it reassured Sasuke that the seal was only active for as long as the tag itself was in contact with his skin, and could easily be removed at any time later.

“Is she really a kunoichi?” he asked, reluctantly putting both his hands on the table.

The Sage laughed. “Natsuko-san is one of the most dangerous people in my employ.”

Sasuke noticed the suffix; from the past two hours of their acquaintance and a brief spar that turned into a one-sided beatdown interspersed with trash-talk (which made Sasuke recall Naruto with fondness) he knew that Jiraiya didn’t use ‘san’ for people. The Fifth Hokage was ‘hime’ and the Third Hokage was ‘sensei’, but that was about it.

The Sage shuddered theatrically. “I’ll give you a piece of free advice, boy – do not offend her. I’m on my second strike… and consequently on my best behaviour.”

“Hn?” Sasuke looked more closely. There wasn’t anything of interest, still. The woman was younger than she appeared at first glance – probably in her early twenties – but her face was marked with the harshness of life. She was thin, bordering on emaciated. There could be hardly any strength in her limbs but, as Sasuke watched her, he noticed a subtle grace to her movements. And also an unexpected situational awareness.

Yes, she could be a kunoichi, despite the convincing disguise. She wore a cotton shirt with a vest over it, cinched tight around her slight waist, and a knee-length skirt. The skirt was nigh on scandalous for a civilian, but for a ninja would be considered positively demure. Moreover, the folds indicated that there was enough fabric that the garment did not limit her range of motion.

“Remember, Tomio-kun. Not worth your life to piss her off.”

If this all was a setup, and the kunoichi’s purpose here was to get impregnated, Sasuke had no qualms about killing her. Pissing her off would be a less desirable result, but he would take it.

Jiraiya magnanimously treated Sasuke to a lunch that, surprisingly, wasn’t completely disgusting. Afterwards they settled on the porch in front of the building; Jiraiya smoked his pipe and Sasuke sat and grinded his teeth, which was about as close as he could get to a semblance of patience.

The waitress came out before Jiraiya finished his pipe; she pulled out a cigarette, which the Sage
’gallantly’ lit for her. They smoked in silence. Sasuke concentrated on his breathing, since the alternative was blowing something up.

Eventually both smokers were satisfied, and the waitress took both Jiraiya and Sasuke round the building to the back. She let them in through the servants’ entrance, behind which was a darkened hall with three doors and a narrow staircase leading up to the first floor, where the help roomed.

The kunoichi unlocked one of the rooms, directed both men to precede her, and closed the door behind her. Only then she spoke: “Clear.”

“Tomio,” Jiraiya said, “this is Natsuko. She’s a waitress here, and one of my best agents. Her cover for field work includes taking care of her very sick mother, so she will often be gone. You’ll need to cover the shifts she tragically has to miss.”

Sasuke understood the assignment. He was supposed to guard the meeting point, report any suspicious activity around this place, and act as the gofer for any information ‘Natsuko’ gathered. He nodded.

This was going to be terrible. But it was far less terrible than Seduction Corps would have been, very likely less terrible than black ops, and he had a miniscule hope that it wouldn’t be as bad as Team Ten either.

“I’ll go talk to Daisuke. Leave you two kids to get to know each other.” The old man grinned and sauntered out of the tiny room, letting the door slam shut behind him with a bang.

The kunoichi looked from the doorway to Sasuke, and in the process her glare dissipated. Her eyes were muddy brown and a little too intense for the rest of her bland appearance; Sasuke was unaccountably glad that she wasn’t glaring at him. She uncomfortably reminded him of Asuka.

“Hello, Tomio-kun,” she said. She inhaled to say something else, but was interrupted by a bout of coughing.

“Natsuko… san,” Sasuke replied stiffly. He had an uncomfortable feeling that he was already failing at his mission. He would have to get better at interacting with people.

This had never been a subject of interest to him.

“I have…” She paused for another cough. “…moved my things around. A bedroll will fit on the floor. You’re welcome to the bed when I’m not here, just….” Another cough wrecked her thin body.

Sasuke couldn’t understand how someone so sick could be any good at undercover work – but perhaps it was just a part of the cover? Or she was so good because nobody expected a sick person to be a spy?

In any case, he suspected that her condition would worsen if she slept on the floor, and he had no problems with using a bedroll. Compared to some other places shinobi were expected to sleep, the floor of a well-insulated room was luxury.

“Tsujimoto Daisuke-san is the owner of the inn,” Natsuko said after a long while of silence.

Sasuke thought he was probably supposed to say something, too, but nothing occurred to him.

Natsuko waited for almost a minute. When Sasuke did not speak, she added: “Meet me downstairs at eleven. I will show you around.”
Sasuke nodded. It was not as though him saying or not saying anything mattered.

He did not expect that their acquaintance would last long, anyway.
A more careful search of the surrounding part of the forest – by which Kakashi meant summoning Akino, Uuhei and Urushi to help Naruto, Juuji and Annai – revealed a few more signs of Sand shinobi.

Most of them weren’t nearly as obviously contrived as Naruto’s first find, but their sheer bulk could have been only half-believable if an army of Sand shinobi had stayed around here for a month or so. Shinobi were not litterers.

“Any distinguishable human smell?” Kakashi inquired. His own nose could only pick up ‘human’ in general, and even that was half his brain filling in what he already knew.

Annoyingly, his three ninken looked to Naruto, as if the boy was the democratically elected speaker for the group with the superior olfactory sense. This wasn’t a reassuring trend.

“Four human or human-ish smells that we could sorta tell from one another—”

“Differentiate,” Uuhei advised under his breath.

“Yeah,” Naruto said, rubbing the back of his head, “differentiate. Anyway, could have been a lot more, ‘cause it’s been a while, but these were the people that actually handled all this stuff.” He waved his hand at the pile of damaged weapons, discarded pieces of clothing (uniformly desert-specific) and even a ‘lost’ Suna hitai-ate.

There was no kill like overkill.

“And if they were, like, family or something, we’re reading them as one person. I mean, it’s been a week, and it rained a bit in between and…” Naruto shrugged helplessly.

Still an absurdly good job, Kakashi mused. At this point it would soon become inefficient to assign himself and Naruto to the same team – especially if searching or hunting was the objective of the mission. Oh, well. Kakashi would enjoy tormenting the kid while he had the chance.

In the meantime, here was to hoping that he’d form an understanding with Genma and Nishi-sensei – two of the most easy-going people Kakashi knew. So far so good. Kakashi was… not entirely pessimistic about this endeavour.

“Are we going to hunt a sabotage squad all over the mountains?” asked Genma from the huddle he formed with Nishi-sensei, sharing their mutual bubble of tolerant skepticism.

How nice to see the bonds between team-members flourish. If only they would deign to include the bratling, too.

“Yeah,” Nishi-sensei said, looking up from organizing a set of poisons (which were the only part of their loot they were interested in keeping), “doesn’t sound optimal. Especially since they’ve had time to get the lay of the land and probably set up a few ugly surprises for us.”

Kakashi pouted. Was that censure? Was the medic nin chastising him about letting Naruto and the ninken comb through a possibly booby-trapped forest?

Frankly, Kakashi had more faith in Naruto than in Genma when it came to spotting and circumventing traps. Based, admittedly, on Iruka’s years of frustration with the boy and Anko’s
stories about the Phantom of Konoha – but those were definitely more reliable indicators than school grades. Also, Genma was a lot better at people than at mechanisms.

“What alternative do we have?” Kakashi inquired, striking a thinking pose.

Genma, being the spoilsport he was, refused to play along. “That’s what we’re asking you, taichou…?”

Still, Genma wasn’t the one who needed to learn (he just needed to learn to let others learn, the overbearing mother-hen).

“Hm?” Kakashi tilted his head, but didn’t go as far as to open his eye.

“Yeah, yeah,” Naruto grumbled, finally catching his cue. “We get them to come to us. By being a danger to their goals, right? Which means… what exactly? Extending a hand in friendship to our ex-invader neighbours?”

“That’s plan B,” Kakashi confirmed with false cheer. Diplomacy. Iruka was far better at those things, and that was saying something, because Iruka’s patience for bullshit was far lower than Kakashi’s own. “Plan A is getting here-” He stuck his finger into the map that had appeared in his hands a split-second ago (pulled out of a sealing scroll, of course, but a good ninja didn’t reveal his tricks). “-and heroically saving the village from the sabotage squad’s guerilla tactics.”

“Ugh…” Naruto rolled his eyes and dropped down to pat flanks and scratch ears to show his appreciation, since no one taught him not to spoil his summons. “…should have figured the game’s rigged. Good to know the Hokage office gets some useful intel.”

Kakashi decided to leave that can of worms untouched.

Let someone else deal with the future problem that was Naruto’s open disdain for Jiraiya.

x

They watched as the sore-pawed couple walked up to Iruka’s back while he sat alone at the ramen place’s counter. The man took the seat on Iruka’s right, the woman on his left.

Guruko rose to his feet. “Sod the stealth part of the mission. I’m going in.” From his vantage point there were four exposed enemy ankles, and he knew just how to bite to sever the tendons-

“Wait,” said Bisuke.

Guruko forced himself to remain in place, but cast a glare sideways at his bodyguarding partner. “They cornered him.”

Bisuke grinned. “Oh, yeah. Yup. Absolutely. And we all know what rats do when they’re cornered, don’t we? This is going to be fun.”

Guruko’s frown deepened. “I thought we agreed on hedgehog?”

Bisuke shrugged. “Sure. But when it comes down to it, a hedgehog is basically a rat with an armoury on his back. Now shut up, I want to hear this.”

x

Dinner at Ichiraku’s was a pure indulgence after a hard morning spent at diplomatic work and an even harder afternoon full of secret meetings and intelligence gathering stuff on a scale that made
Iruka very uncomfortable.

But, Sasuke’s cover was now firmly established, and as details would trickle out of the Tower to the public over the course of an ‘investigation’, it was Iruka’s task to play the clueless Academy teacher that believed in his former pupil’s innocence, but was becoming gradually disillusioned.

He glumly stirred his noodles and missed Naruto, who wasn’t sitting next to him where he belonged.

“I heard Uchiha killed an ANBU before he defected,” said a familiar voice.

Iruka didn’t flinch, warned by the approaching footsteps, but he still said a silent goodbye to his nice dinner and steeled himself to play his role. This wasn’t the first time a prank of his had come back to bite him on the arse, and at least this time he held nearly all the important cards in his hand.

Just because there were two of them, both jounin and therefore stronger and faster than him, it didn’t mean they had the advantage.

“Oh,” Iruka said and made it a point to focus on his ramen while Asuma and Kurenai took seats on both sides of him, like a pair of Yakuza enforcers. He imagined them lumbering and dragging their knuckles on the ground, and then chased the picture away, because this was not the time to be laughing. “That’s funny,” he said flatly.

“Funny is how those sorts of tendencies don’t get noticed at the Shinobi Academy,” said Kurenai, ever the more straightforwardly aggressive one between them. “That’s your second traitor in, what – half a year?”

“Well,” Iruka said with affability that, he knew, made people think he was a lot more naïve than he really was, “I rather thought the accusation was funny because the ANBU Commander reported full roster this morning. There are three hospitalised operatives at the moment, but no fatalities.” Iruka let his eyes widen as far as they would go, and very pointedly bit down on his lower lip. Whoops… look at me casually dropping some very confidential intel in an effort to make myself look smart. Intel which, of course, he had been instructed to casually drop to some likely jounin, and how nice of these two to volunteer. “You should inform Hokage-sama about these rumours, sensei. It’s very concerning if the ANBU Commander can’t correctly count his own people. And even more concerning if we have ANBU imposters in the village.”

There. The idea of ‘ANBU imposters’ seeded. Now just to watch it grow in this fertile earth.

For a moment Iruka wondered if Asuma would spontaneously combust. He looked calm, but in the way a statue of an angry person looked calm. And there was a flush creeping up from the collar of his mesh undershirt.

“I’ve seen the body,” Kurenai said sharply. “That boy murdered someone-”

“If he was being abducted of course he defended himself,” Iruka replied with his best imitation of blitheness. “I am very proud of him, and very sad that his efforts weren’t enough.”

“You just don’t want to admit that you missed not one, but two traitors in your immediate circle of acquaintances,” retorted Asuma. The flush had dispersed by now as the man regained his footing in the conversation and shifted closer to Iruka, violating his intimate sphere. “Or maybe you didn’t miss them. Maybe you just didn’t report them.”

Iruka counted in his head. His inhales and exhales were carefully measured, the way he had learnt to breathe through accusations of being a traitor when he was nine. Nine and newly orphaned and surrounded by children whose own pain drove them to be exceptionally cruel.
“I…” Iruka spoke, and swallowed the knee-jerk response of ‘am very sad that your inability to teach three preteens drove your most promising student away from you as fast as possible and resulted in the clusterfuck that has you on probation even now’ together with a narutomaki from his ramen bowl. “…understand that you have been put into a very difficult position as Sasuke’s current commanding officer, Asuma-sensei.”

Before he could continue, Kurenai tried to cut in. “Thank you for that line, Umino-sensei – do they teach that at the Hokage Tower-?”

“And worse than that,” Iruka continued, finally lifting his eyes to meet Asuma’s, even though he still wasn’t entirely certain that Kurenai wouldn’t take the opportunity to try something devious and probably genjutsu-related behind his back, “I know that this must feel like a personal failure. It certainly did feel like that to me when Mizuki’s treachery was finally revealed. I assure you that Yamanaka-san was not any less thorough in his interrogation simply because I was in a hospital bed at the time with an uncertain prognosis.”

This was a little bit of an exaggeration, because no one had seriously believed that Iruka had been in on that utterly stupid plot. The reminder of Iruka’s injuries (he had only had a couple of cracked ribs, but that was not publicly available information) did work to unsettle Asuma’s footing again.

What, had these two expected Iruka to weep and plead for their belief in his innocence? They were thirteen years too late. The bullies at the Academy had helped thicken his skin against this sort of libel.

And, honestly, he was still officially the Hokage’s aide, and cooperated with her (if by the proxy of shadow clones) daily. What was this harassment really about?

“Teuchi-san, could I trouble you for a glass of water?” he inquired, reminding his companions that they were not actually unobserved, and that simply because the Ichiraku were civilians it did not mean they were blind or deaf.

“Sure thing, sensei, be right there.”

“I am certain,” Iruka said to Asuma, “that this tragic incident won’t reflect on your teaching once the matter is cleared up. Many people over the years have tried to hurt Sasuke-kun, or use him for their own purposes. Even Orochimaru had confessed to an interest in the boy. I am…” He paused and tried to imagine how he would feel if Sasuke truly had been abducted in the middle of the night from right under his nose. “…just angry and appalled that we did not manage to protect him as he deserved.”

He could feel the fight draining out of Asuma. Oh, he must have hit some sensitive buttons in there. Failure to protect, huh?

The man pulled a cigarette out of his pouch and bit down on it.

Teuchi-san placed Iruka’s glass of water in front of him with a quick glance at the ‘no smoking at the counter’ sign.

Asuma did not make a move to light his cigarette.

“You do have a tendency to pity the aggressors,” Kurenai pointed out – aggressively. Like a stepped-on grass snake.

Maybe Iruka shouldn’t have stepped on her – but, well, what was all his power for if not to defend what was his and precious to him? She should not have let ambition, fear of marginalisation and
jealousy of Kakashi’s well-earned position goad her into trying to bully Kakashi. Not that it had worked, but Iruka felt entitled to his own pound of flesh in restitution.

“I understand that sometimes people seem aggressive when, in fact, they are only frightened,” Iruka retorted and, when coupled with meeting her eyes and projecting the weight behind his statement through his stare, she got it.

She clenched her jaw but remained silent, too; well aware that if she fought back she would simply be validating Iruka’s accusation.

Iruka smiled over the counter. “Thank you, Teuchi-san. Excellent as always.”

Teuchi-san grinned back. “Eh, come again soon, sensei. I miss Naruto-kun, and it’s nice to have pleasant company. And what can I get for you two, shinobi-san?”

Iruka took his leave, nodding to the two jounin with all the professional friendliness he had cultivated over his tenure at the Academy, and went home before it occurred to them to follow him. He still did not want anybody to know where he lived.

x

“Double knock-out!” Bisuke announced cheerfully.

Guruko grinned and jumped forth to follow on the heels of their mark. One more proof that Kakashi had struck gold when he picked his mate.

x

Jiraiya woke up to a toad jumping onto his face.

He dodged in a nick of time and then squinted at the horizon, where the sun was just setting.

“Thanks, Gamakichi,” he grumbled. “Old age sucks. Times were, I could camp out for a month and not feel it in the mornings.”

“You should be sleeping at night if you wanna wake up in the morning,” Gamakichi informed him sagely. “And it’s always better if you sleep at an inn.”

Of this Jiraiya was well aware. Unfortunately, he was at the moment laying a false trail for the Konoha retrieval team to follow and, as he was playing a frightened thirteen-year-old boy on the run from his village, sleeping at inns would compromise his story. Little Uchiha might have had money, but even he wasn’t as arrogant as to not even try and stay inconspicuous.

It wasn’t easy to strike the right amount of incompetence for a genius gennin so that the trail was clear but not as easy to follow as to seem intentional. Jiraiya gave it his best effort.

“Tell your Dad I’m fine. I’ll cross the Land of Rice Fields tonight, unless I stumble over something crucial. I’ll summon you or your brother when I need a guard again.” He needed a discreet alarm clock rather than a guard, but couching it in more dignified terms made the little toads happy.

“Sure thing, Jiraiya!” Gamakichi replied happily, and dismissed himself.

Jiraiya sighed. He had thought of Naruto inheriting the toad contract as a done deal. It had never occurred to him that Naruto might not want it. Might not want anything at all from him, in fact.

Ah, well. Want it or not, Jiraiya was not going to stop doing his best to protect his Godson. And that
meant a trip through the tumultuous Rice Fields, then through Hot Water to Frost, making short check-ins with his contacts. He didn’t expect to learn much, since most Akatsuki activity was concentrated on the other side of the continent, but this way he could catch a ship to the Land of Waves and get back from that direction, while letting his pursuers believe that Uchiha Sasuke had gone on to the Land of Lightning.

Where, everyone knew, he would be welcome with open arms, because Cloud ninja were all hot for doujutsu.

x

“Your Mother loves you,” Shikamaru’s Dad had assured him in the early, early morning, while he was heartlessly pulling Shikamaru out of bed.

And, sure, Shikamaru knew she loved him. He just wished it didn’t translate into having such high ambitions for him. He would have been perfectly happy with that courier mission he was supposed to get – next week.

It wasn’t like they were even at real war. They had headed off the real war for this play-pretend official state of warfare, of which Shikamaru personally completely approved. Also, he suspected that the ‘they’ might have at least partially consisted of ‘Naruto’, but at the moment he was still working on constructing a viable hypothesis that would fit this realisation into his worldview.

He looked around at the perfectly tranquil forest – golden rays of sunlight streaming through vividly green canopy, birds chirping, small animals scuttling around – and sighed. This was too nice a day for a paradigm shift. He was postponing that-

“Keep up, pekopeko, or we’ll leave you behind!” his Mother called out.

Shikamaru identified the tone of voice as gleeful, so it was obviously just an attempt to humiliate him before his colleagues rather than an actual complaint on her part. Toge-san and his partner Yasha sniggered.

Tomoko-san didn’t. But she was an Aburame, so the lack of outward reaction did not mean much. Also, she had made tokubetsu jounin on the strength of her genjutsu, which combined with her kikaichu was a lot more intimidating than it sounded, and Shikamaru just did not want to find himself a target for her amusement.

“I like this place,” Shikamaru replied, hunching over. “I think I’ll become a hermit. Take my hitai-ate back to the Hokage and tell her I wish her all the luck-”

“Should I go kick him in the cushion?” asked Inuzuka Toge in what wasn’t half as quiet a voice as he imagined he was using. It was clearly a rhetorical question since, being Nara Yoshino’s former gennin teammate, he had known Shikamaru for all of his life.

Shikamaru would have pointed out the factual inaccuracy – his arse was made of muscle and some very sharp bone, which, incidentally, made it extremely uncomfortable to sit on hard surfaces – but he didn’t want to invite a taijutsu attack from Toge-san.

He knew better than that.

“Eh, he’s just whining,” said Shikamaru’s Mother. “It’s easier to let him get it out than argue and give him a reason to dig his heels in.”

Foiled, Shikamaru thought, unsurprised. People always remembered that his Dad was a genius, and
that was the smokescreen his Mother used with relish and to many unfortunates’ belated horror.

“This is so contrived,” Shikamaru grumbled. “I don’t know Uchiha Sasuke enough to be of any help-”

“You went to the same class with him for five years,” his Mother snapped, and there was that long-suffering tone that heralded an imminent dispensation of pain and regret upon those who caused her discontent.

Shikamaru cringed. “More like, I slept through five years of classes. If you wanted me to spy on him, you should have said so.” Frankly, if Shikamaru would have watched any of his classmates out of genuine interest, it would have been Shino. Or Naruto, alright, but only since he became the Phantom of Konoha.

That was… cool. For someone of their age and training.

His Mother body-flickered and appeared in front of him, giving him a minor attack of nerves. While he focused on breathing evenly, she stood on a low branch and folded her arms in front of her chest. She tapped her foot.

Shikamaru swallowed.

“I would have preferred to take Naruto-kun along,” she said mercilessly, “but Kakashi-kun stole him away.” She pouted.

Shikamaru knew for a fact that she wasn’t nearly close enough with Hatake Kakashi to call him that, and that she held enough respect for the elite jounin that there would have been a politer suffix if they were meeting face to face.

“So try and not make me regret taking you along, chuunin,” she concluded. “Get your arse in gear and act like a shinobi of Leaf.”

Shikamaru shrugged at her. *Whatever* she said. He did regret being dragged along, and he was taking it out on everybody by not reminding the rest of the party that they had veered off course an hour ago and were now following a decoy. Saying it once had been enough, right?

Shikamaru had allegedly been dragged along for his insight, but his insight wasn’t wanted. When he tried to speak up, Toge-san had shut him down with some self-congratulatory spiel about his superior sense of smell and tracking abilities. So, sure, no skin off Shikamaru’s nose if he just tagged along to even out the numbers.

Maybe Yasha should not have pushed him into the blackberry bush. Maybe Tomoko-san should not have told Shikamaru to ‘watch how the experienced hunters work and learn something’.

Another reason – the one he would state in his report – for why he didn’t argue was that he couldn’t explain it. The best he had was that it didn’t add up in his head (yes, he knew that there was a good chance his Mother would actually accept this as valid reasoning, but he decided to pretend that he didn’t know that). The Inuzuka was obviously following his nose, so the decoy-creator had to be good at this, but Uchiha had no earthly reason to run this way.

Shikamaru trusted his brain over his senses. He trusted his brain over other people’s senses, too.

“Yes, Ma’am,” he said despondently, and followed in the wake of a bunch of chuunin and tokubetsu jounin led around by an Inuzuka’s nose.
“Are you sure about this, nii-san?” Hinata inquired nervously. This was not what she expected to do on her first reluctantly approved walk outside the Hospital.

“It worked well for Naruto-san,” Neji replied.

It was moments like these that made Hinata realise that Neji-nii-san had not changed all that much. He had simply chosen a new ideal to work towards, and went after his goal with the same blind devotion to it as ever.

Hinata didn’t quite manage to suppress a sigh but, fortunately, her cousin mistook it for a swallowed sound of pain, and merely moved to better support her.

“It need not be today if you are-”

“I’ll be fine, I promise,” Hinata cut him off. She enjoyed being cared for, but there was a point at which all the fussing became too much. This attentive Neji-nii-san was a new and amazing experience, and she hoped they could build a true sibling relationship in the future, but she wished he would trust her a little more.

Ah, perhaps they simply needed time. Neji-nii-san did, after all, see her break under his hands recently. Even if he was the one to inflict the damage intentionally, it wasn’t an experience he could just shrug off.

They entered Training Ground Six – the one closest to the Hospital. Kiba-kun and Shino-kun were already there, and they had readied a place for Hinata to rest. They stopped short of bringing a whole bed, but there was a spread bedroll, several cushions and a pile of blankets.

Hinata sighed again.

“Hey, Hinata!” Kiba-kun called out, and ran over to take her from Neji-nii-san.

Out of deference to her still healing injuries the boys limited their tug-o-war with her to intense glaring and grimacing, and no one actually jerked her anywhere, for which she was very grateful.

“You ready to have your arse whooped, Goat Boy?!” Kiba-kun crowed while Hinata was being lowered to the bedroll by the joint forces of himself and Shino-kun.

“I am ready to fight,” nii-san replied coolly. “However, if you wish for a more intense confrontation than a basic spar, I insist on supervision. Has your jounin-sensei declined?”

“Busy,” said Shino-kun. “Teaching Sakura the basics of non-visual genjutsu.”

“But we roped in someone who’s infinitely more fun,” Kiba-kun cut in.

“Hey, kids,” said Mitarashi Anko-san, leaping down from the wall that separated the Hospital grounds from the training field. “Oh, awesome! Got the dramatic timing right this time! Now!” She clapped her hands. “Let’s have some dirty, cheating, bone-breaking fight here! I promise to take what’s left of you to someone certified to deal with it!”

Hinata felt a chill down her spine, and pulled one of the blankets around her.

Surely this would be okay? Surely the Chuunin Exams proctor was capable of supervising gennin
fights? That was basically what Chuunin Exams proctors did… right?

Sasuke had barely slept for the last week. Between the situation in Konoha, his run toward the meeting point, and the fact that he was now sharing a room with a living, breathing, digesting human after six years of sleeping alone in the Compound, added up to a state akin to suspended animation.

On top of that he was learning to help run an inn while pretending that he was already familiar with all the activities involved. His saving grace was that Tsujimoto-san, the owner, was Jiraiya’s acquaintance, and thus pretended not to see any discrepancies in Sasuke’s backstory.

In the end it was no surprise that when his free afternoon finally arrived and he dragged himself out to train, he ended up injuring himself.

“Damn it!”

Once his eyes stopped tearing up and he could take a clear look at his arm, he revised his initial assumption. He had worse than injured himself. How? Just how was his arm looking like he had stuck it in the bread oven?! Lightning was his element, and even fire hadn’t done this to him. And he had been seven at the time!

It really, really hurt.

He bit his lip and wondered what now. There was no hospital around here to take care of those stupid enough to get injured-

“Tomio-kun? Are you alright?” Natsuko walked out of the trees.

She had been polite and more gracious than Sasuke deserved (even though his usual acerbity was somewhat curbed by his chronic exhaustion), but that didn’t translate to Sasuke trusting her. He didn’t want her to see him weakened like this.

And that question – was he alright?

No, he was not alright. He was a failure! He could barely just manage to channel lightning chakra through a blade, and the Chidori seemed completely out of his grasp. Why couldn’t Kakashi just teach that to him? What would it take?

Sasuke had thought that it would be easy enough to repeat the jutsu once he had seen it with the Sharingan – he had seen Kakashi copy a more complicated jutsu and turn it back on Zabuza in real time! and he wasn’t even an Uchiha! – but the only thing he had managed so far was a few multidirectional lightning bolts and a lot of pain.

The guarded worry on Natsuko’s face made him flush in shame. “Just a little electrical burn,” he assured her. He was becoming accustomed to the hurt now, and he was used to working through pain in general.

“Show me,” she ordered.

Sasuke tried to protest, but a moment later he found himself sitting on an overturned log, tied to it with coils of ninja wire, and with his arm in Natsuko’s gentle grip.

How fast was she? How strong? He hadn’t even seen her move-
“You are damaging your chakra pathways,” she said so coldly it burnt. “If you keep training like this, you will give yourself permanent nerve and coil damage.”

Sasuke barely recognised her. She had seemed so mild. She didn’t even snap at the rude customers.

He wondered if he should apologise. Or explain. “I need to train,” he said, watching closely as her hand glowed green and she started healing the worst oozing breaks of his scorched skin. “I... I can’t afford to stagnate. I need to get stronger.”

“Yes,” she replied, shocking him with the easy agreement. He didn’t think anybody he had ever met had wanted him to become stronger (except that man, and even that was just so he could have a challenge). “You do. But this is not the way.”

Natsuko pulled a roll of gauze out of a storage seal.

“I am trained for basic field medicine, but I am not a healer. I have done what I could, but... Tomiokun, I mean it. If you continue this, you will cripple yourself.”

Sasuke hung his head. He knew. He knew she was right, but what other option was left to him? Except leaving—

“If you want,” Natsuko said, “I will teach you.”

Sasuke raised his head, shocked. She finished bandaging his arm and then looked up to meet his eye, perfectly calm and collected, and despite the sharpness of her features Sasuke thought he had been an idiot to not see the cordialness in her face.

Perhaps he simply didn’t recognise it before. It had been a very long time since someone looked at him like they cared about him.

And now that he knew, he remembered another half-forgotten thing. He said that thing out loud: “Thank you.”

x

“Final count of casualties is zero,” Anko-san reported sadly, letting herself into Hinata’s hospital room. “But Aburame-kun gets the points for effort. That part where his hive took three Kaiten and then drained the rest of your cuz’s chakra until he fainted rocked.”

Hinata sighed and closed her eyes. She was more tired than she had been after their first C-rank mission. Fortunately, the medics confirmed that Neji-nii-san would be okay, so she could go to sleep now.

The door clicked shut behind the nurse leaving.

There was a scraping sound as Anko-san turned the chair around before sitting astride it. “The boys did good,” she said quietly.

Hinata opened her eyes slightly. She could not quite smile yet, but she had a feeling than Neji-nii-san might have been right, and what this wound needed to heal was reopening it briefly and cleaning it out. No matter how much it hurt.

“Kiba-kun used taijutsu to fight an opponent well known for his superior taijutsu,” Hinata pointed out. She had wanted to cover her eyes during that part. With the chakra suppressors the Byakugan wouldn’t have let her see through her palm, and for once she would have been glad for it.
“Just goes to show,” replied Anko-san who, for being abrasive and having a shocking sense of humour, was actually really nice. Deep inside. It showed in moments like this – when she sat with Hinata even though she didn’t have to, and talked to her. Just to make her feel better after her cousin and her teammates put each other into the Hospital as though it weren’t enough that Hinata herself was stuck here.

“Goes to show what?” asked Hinata.

Anko-san laughed. “Goes to show they want to wail on each other more than they really want to kill each other.”

“Oh.” Hinata thought about it. She finally smiled. “That is good.”

Watching the first fight had been like watching carts collide at high speed. Partnering with Akamaru-kun enabled Kiba-kun to land a couple of hits, before Neji-nii-san decided that he wanted to give no more handicap, systematically disabled all eight limbs attacking him and delivered a beatdown that hurt to witness.

Still, Akamaru-kun regained some mobility by cancelling his transformation, and took a bite out of Neji-nii-san’s calf. Just a shallow one, but it bled profusely and somehow in all that chaos nii-san stepped on Kiba-kun and, apparently, snapped his femur.

“I had no idea gennin duels were this fun!” Anko-san grinned. “I think we should make this a thing. A whole underground ring with gambling and booze and mini ninja beating each other up! Better than cockfights!”

Hinata giggled. Anko-san’s sense of humour was extremely suspect, but Hinata was tired and relieved and wanted to have a good giggle.

“Your cuz is good for a one-trick pony.”

Hinata’s smile fell. “He is amazing for being self-taught. I had teachers, and I am not a quarter as good.”

Anko-san scowled, too. “What do you mean, self-taught?”

Hinata considered just letting it rest; it wasn’t good form to air the family dirty laundry in front of strangers… but she had had this anger brewing inside her for a long time. Perhaps she had been simply waiting for the right listener before she let herself pour it out.

She met Anko-san’s eye (Anko-san could look into the Byakugan like there was nothing odd about it, and Hinata admired that) and stated talking. About the limits imposed on the branch family’s training and about what she suspected of Gai-sensei’s teaching style.

Anko-san listened. And took Hinata’s concerns seriously.

x

“Ninja?”

“Leaf ninja.”

“Wait, you mean they’re from-”

“But I thought the other guys were from Fire? Are they, like, gone bad?”
“Their head thingy wasn’t crossed, so they’re legit.”

“But these are legit, too.”

“They’re all monsters!” wailed a woman, cutting off the whispered conversation. “Monsters!”

“You shouldn’t travel alone,” said the shopkeeper under her breath, glancing nervously around before looking Naruto in the eye. “Why, a slip of a thing like you – I shudder to think what could happen to you!”

Naruto, under the guise of a civilian version of Katou Kyou, paid for four apples and stashed them in an improvised bag made of a tied-up sheet. “I know, ba-san,” he said, “but… no one here goes that way, and my brother expected me a week ago. He must be out of his mind with worry by now…”

The woman sighed. “You take care, and if you see anybody, hide. Times were, no one came this far up in the mountains. And now the woods are full of murderers… and worse.”

“I will,” Naruto promised, and with a cheerless wave exited the only store within a day’s walk. He made his way through the village at a slow pace, like he had been walking all day and expected to walk all night, until he got to the chain bridge hanging precariously over a ravine.

There he scaled the nearly sheer rock face upwards and joined the rest of his team in the camp. They accepted his gift of apples without even a grumble that could be mistaken for gratitude. Naruto had hoped to foster a little fellowship, but a village wasn’t built in a day.

“Dinner,” announced Nishi-sensei, and handed over cold gruel with a handful of berries half-submerged in it.

Naruto grimaced, but ate. It was still a step up from nutrition bars, and they couldn’t risk fire with enemy ninja around.


“It started about a month after the second Chuunin Exam,” Naruto said. “At first there were isolated attacks, so people thought they had bandits. Tried to hire shinobi to clear out the forest, but the messengers they sent out got killed and now it’s too risky to travel. They don’t have any way to call for help, and at this point they wouldn’t ask. They don’t trust shinobi. Think we’re all just murderers.” On one hand, Naruto understood why the villagers thought that way. On the other hand, he understood how wrong they were and all that they didn’t – couldn’t – know.

Like the worst part of the story. “Whoever’s attacking them, they sometimes let someone live to spread the story. They wear Konoha hitai-ate.”

“Nukenin?” senbon guy asked, with the kind of hopeful tone that didn’t believe in itself. He already knew what the answer would be.

Naruto stuffed a spoonful of gruel into his mouth and shook his head.

“Great,” senbon guy grumbled. “So, someone is impersonating Konoha shinobi to terrorise a village that frankly nobody cares about. This is plainly nothing but a heavy-handed attempt to start a war.”

“But,” Nishi-sensei inquired placidly, “who actually wants a war between Fire and Wind?”

“Stone,” Naruto replied. “Grass and Rock might profit, too. Lightning and Water will take anything that weakens Konoha. But if we’re taking bets, I’m putting a hundred ryo on Sound.”
“Reasoning?” Dog-taichou inquired, lowering his book to look at Naruto over the top of it.

Naruto shrugged. “It’s the kind of a dick move they’d pull. And one of the survivors said he heard bells ring when they attacked. It could be someone framing Sound for framing us, but the people with that kind of imagination are better at what they do. This is…” Naruto searched for a word. Also, he took the opportunity to finish off his bowl. Plain as the food was, he could have eaten ten times more.

“Artless,” offered Dog-taichou. Then he closed his book with a resounding snap and stashed it away. “Our objective is to neutralise these unknown shinobi, but in such a way that the villagers would acknowledge and accept our actions. Any suggestions?”

“Walk into the village and convince them to hire us?” senbon guy recited, obviously not believing a word he was saying, and just putting it out there to be shot down.

Taichou didn’t react to him.

Nishi-sensei shrugged. “We could hunt the enemy shinobi down and present them to the villagers? Preferably alive, although in that case I request to be allowed to absent myself for the aftermath.”

Naruto thought the suggestion had merit, but it was about as artless as their enemy’s strategy. Superficial, straightforward, relying too much on things like people’s goodwill which, Naruto knew, had been murdered in this particular village together with upwards of a dozen of the locals.

“Naruto?” asked Dog in the serious, I-mean-business tone of voice.

Naruto’s stomach gurgled. He patted it. It was lucky he had already had a bunch of ideas while doing recon, ‘cause he couldn’t think all that good while trapped in one place, and there was barely enough space for them all to lie down in the camp. Nowhere to pace, much less do a kata. “Get them to hire us.”

“That’s what I said,” pointed out senbon guy, “and we already agreed-”

“You said to convince them,” Naruto cut in. “Convince. Like we’re talking about the Council-”

“Saa,” said Kakashi-sensei. Pointedly.

Naruto shut up. He didn’t feel bad, though. He knew that senbon guy was doing this all on purpose. He wasn’t exactly riling Naruto up, just sort of taking every opportunity to make it more than clear that he thought Naruto was worthless.

Fine. Whatever. If Naruto took people’s disapproval personally, he’d have killed himself with the kunai Old Man Hokage had given him for his fifth birthday.

“A Yamanaka would be dead useful now,” senbon guy admitted with a mournful sigh.

Sure, taking over a local and puppetting them to request aid would be easiest. But they didn’t have a Yamanaka, so they would have to do the next best thing.

Naruto hadn’t spent more than two hours in the village, but he had eaten a sit-down meal (girl-sized, so it was barely as much as the bowl of gruel) at the minshuku (actually just a house with a spare room in the attic and a kitchen big enough to seat eight people) and felt like he could pretend to be one of them for two crucial minutes.

“I can do it,” he said into the thoughtful silence.
Dog-taichou tilted his head to the side. “Sway them or impersonate one?”

“Either.” Naruto shrugged. He could talk them into it, he didn’t doubt that, but it would take so long, and were they or were they not shinobi? “But the impersonation would probably be easier.”

Kakashi nodded. “Tomorrow. For now, get some rest. Genma… patrol.”

x

Anko believed little Hinata, but she hadn’t risen to the rank of tokubetsu jounin by taking things at face value. So she tracked down Maito Gai’s team and… passed by during their training. They were fine on missions, but the trainings did look a lot like what Ugly Duckling described.

Maybe Gai had some long-term rotation set up, but Anko decided that she had enough due cause to step into this bog and let the mire pull her in – because while about ten percent of their time together Gai spent imparting his unconventional wisdom and teaching the nibbets How the World Worked, the remaining ninety percent were dedicated to only one of the three students. The same one every day. Despite being Gai, Gai didn’t have more than hundred percent of his own time, and thus, betrayed by math, his other two students just sort of lingered on the sidelines and worked on their own stuff.

Case in point. As Anko approached the training field, the girl gennin was standing between three unevenly spaced training posts and figuring out how to add wind chakra to her shuriken. She wasn’t getting far yet, but she was close enough to the right track.

She wasn’t Wind-natured, so she probably had a long and hard road ahead of her if she wanted to make it worthwhile. More power to her, though, Anko thought – anybody who doubled down and worked their arse off to get good at shit deserved some cheerleading.

The Hyuuga was repeating a piece of kata over and over and over ad nauseam, making small adjustments each time, and it took Anko a while of watching to realise that he was actually reverse-engineering some Juuken technique by trying to figure out the right sequence of movements, all extremely slowed down and done with, frankly, insane patience. Over and over and over again.

Anko hoped Hiashi would trip over his robes and faceplant into a pile of horseshit. At least once a day. Preferably on his way to Council meetings.

“Hey, Gai! Hey!” Anko hopped on the spot and waved her hands over her head. She wasn’t going to insert herself into a spar between two taijutsu monsters. Well, not today. And even then she would prefer it to be a euphemism (without any baby taijutsu monsters involved). “Hey!”

“Oh, the Vivacious Anko-san!” Gai landed on the grass in front of her, ignored the earth cracking under him, and grinned blindingly. “How may we aid you on this Fine Morning-?”

“Lend me a gennin,” Anko cut in. Rude, sure, but cutting in was the only way to actually have a conversation with Gai when he was in an exuberant mood. “You’re not using it, are you?”

“Lend me a gennin,” Anko cut in. Rude, sure, but cutting in was the only way to actually have a conversation with Gai when he was in an exuberant mood. “You’re not using it, are you?”

The girl scowled and geared up to protest the ‘it’, but the Hyuuga merely looked apathetic. Maybe a little confused.

Come to think of it, Gai also looked confused. “We are having A Team Training, Anko-san-”

“You’re training that one,” Anko pointed out, and jabbed her kunai in the air in the direction of the down-scaled clone. “You’re not doing anything with these two.” She waved her hand at the scowling walking armory and the Hyuuga. “I mean, I could take them both if you don’t need them,
but I really just wanted to borrow the one-”

“I am afraid, Anko-san,” Gai said with the kind of patience people used when they were giving a
detailed explanation of something simple or obvious to someone tragically slow, “that as we are A
Team, we take all missions as A Team. If you require a gennin-”

“It’s not for a mission,” Anko cut him off before he could get going and bust out the capitals.
“C’mon, Gai, lend me one minion. I’ll return it all in one piece, promise. I mean, it might get a little
scuffed, but rub a bit of spit on it and it’ll be all shiny again!” She didn’t even leer – yay for self-
control!

The girl’s face was, funnily enough, turning a fetching burgundy colour.

Anko met the Hyuuga’s eye and tried to communicate that this was the point where he should get
involved.

He looked confused, but something must have gotten through, because he turned to his team leader.
“Gai-sensei, if Anko-san requires assistance, I can continue my training later. It is… no problem.”

“Yosh!” exclaimed the clone. “My teammate! You are so helpful and kind-”

“That’s agreed, then,” Anko cut in quickly, because apparently the clone had all of Gai’s intensity
with none of his ability to dilute himself to make himself somewhat safe for consumption. “C’mon,
minion, let’s make tracks!”

She wanted to Shunshin to escape the immediate vicinity of Gai-and-clone, but went at a slower pace
to make it possible for the gennin to follow her. He did. His speed was – well, as expected form a
Hyuuga. Respectable even for a chuunin.

They arrived at an empty training field.

Anko waited for a moment to make sure that they had not been followed – as far as she knew Gai’s
only summon was too huge to conveniently hide in a tree, and she wasn’t sure if he even could make
shadow clones (though the idea struck the meeting point between terrifying and hot perfectly). There
was no one anywhere around.

She looked down at the boy, who was staring somewhere in the general direction of her (hard to tell
exactly where with those pupil-less eyes) and waiting patiently for her to reveal what dastardly plans
she had for him.

“So,” Anko faux-mused, putting her hand on her hip, “he teach you to body-flicker yet?”

Hyuuga stared for a few more seconds, thrown by the completely unexpected line of inquiry. Then
he shook his head.

Motherfucker, Anko thought. This boy could have it down in days, and in combination with his Clan
taijutsu that would be a nightmare in a melee fight. Like Shisui, but with the added humiliation of
getting tickled to death.

“You wanna learn?” she asked, already knowing what the answer would be.

He nodded.

Anko grinned.
Once Sasuke learnt the basics of how not to kill the customers (including how not to make them think he was going to kill them) and also mastered several crucial catering skills (he was a talented, trained shinobi, and this was not exactly an A-rank jutsu), he and Natsuko staggered their shifts.

This, on one hand, meant less work for either of them – they drew salary from Konoha through Jiraiya, so Tsujimoto-san did not care, as long as the customers were attended – but on the other hand it meant that the only time they had left for training was at night.

There were plenty of handy remote clearings in the surrounding forests, and Natsuko selected one that was five minutes of run from the inn. The access was not exactly practical, but after a quick look around Sasuke had to admit that unless they worked on actual A-rank jutsu, their light effects would not be visible from either the road or the nearest village. The trees were as thick as if the Shodai had passed through these parts of the country in a particularly fertile mood.

“You are primarily a fire type, I believe,” Natsuko spoke in a tone reminiscent of Sasuke’s past teachers, “but you should be genetically predisposed for genjutsu. I hope you are smarter than to believe genjutsu is the soft or girlish option – I would just remind you that some of the most feared shinobi in the world were genjutsu masters.”

Most feared shinobi? Perhaps. Sasuke was more interested due to that man being renowned for his illusions.

“Young shinobi often mistake loud and flashy for impressive. In my opinion, the truly impressive jutsu require superior control,” Natsuko concluded quietly, taking off her shoes. “Of both your chakra and your body.”

Sasuke found himself staring at her feet – pale and callused, as if she walked barefoot daily, over all sorts of terrain. He kept the fact that his primary affinity was lightning to himself (he had little reason to trust his colleague yet) and focused on the other thing she said. *Genetically predisposed for genjutsu.*

He scowled. “Did Jiraiya tell you who I really am?”

“Yes.”

“So you know I can learn faster with-”

“No,” she cut in, leaving no room for argument.

“What do you mean, no?”

She sighed, as if he was a little child throwing a tantrum. “I won’t teach you to depend on a degenerative doujutsu-”

“Degenerative?” Sasuke snapped at this complete stranger who thought she was better informed about his own damn kekkei genkai than he was. “What do you mean *degenerative*?”

“Ask Jiraiya-sama. He can tell you the details.” She seemed so cold, so unaffected, that Sasuke doubted any amount of yelling or threatening would get him anything but a swift retraction of the offer to help him train. She was not quite as elusive as Kakashi, but possibly even more intractable. “I will teach you the way I would teach anybody. Or do you need that crutch to control your chakra?”
Sasuke sputtered. So maybe he did not have perfect chakra-control like Sakura did, but at least he had more chakra than what would fit into a thimble.

Natsuko accepted his expression as acquiescence, and with a flick of her wrist strung her ninja wire between two trees, ten feet above the ground. She walked up one of the trunks and then stepped onto the wire with deceptive ease.

Sasuke knew how thin that wire was. Under the weight of a body – even a slight one like Natsuko’s – it should have cut straight through her feet. It would have cut even through soles of standard ninja sandals, but Natsuko was barefoot.

She walked forwards as though she were simply walking down a path. Not even the slightest loss of equilibrium, not even the slightest cut on her feet – and then she was on the other side.

Sasuke had done a little tightrope walking as an exercise of balance, but this was a whole other level. “How,” he spoke, embarrassed but unable to hide his wonder, “are you doing that?”

Natsuko jumped down to the grass. “Chakra control. But, let’s start you on something a little easier and work up to this.”

x

The corpse was fresh. Uuhei must have followed the sharp smell of blood; now he stood sentinel over the body until Kakashi-taichou squatted down by it, checked that the woman was truly dead and there was absolutely nothing they could do for her.

Nothing but help those she had left behind. Naruto recognised her – she was one of the villagers, and about the most interesting subject of gossip they had. There wasn’t a lot to talk about this far from civilisation that wasn’t death or weather.


Naruto didn’t like how it made him sound – so emotionless, like a machine – but he also could follow the reasoning, and agreed that this was a situation they could spin to their advantage.

He resolved to think of it as Wakana-san dying to give the rest of the village a chance to survive.

He squatted opposite taichou and closely studied the pale face, bloodless half-open lips, a smear of blood from a blow to the head. Wakana-san had been pretty. And chatty. And lonely, in this isolated village where the only other girl her age had married over to the next mountain and moved. Wakana-san had been pretty enough to have a number of suitors, and although she had agreed to the Chief’s son’s proposal, Naruto knew that she didn’t love him.

She had loved someone else, a lot, enough to still smell of him now. The smith, maybe? Someone at the smithy, anyway.

“I can do it,” he said. It would have to be exact and quick, because all the villagers knew Wakana-san, while Naruto didn’t. He would get some leeway, but not enough for a conversation with anyone. “We’ll have to be fast.”

And then, because gods were in a bad mood today, it started to rain.
The rain broke. Thick stormclouds hung overhead, taking a short rest before another squall.

Naruto drew in a last breath.

Wakana exhaled. She limped through the dew-wet undergrowth, shivering with cold. Her dress was torn, so she didn’t care when thorns snagged at it and opened new rips. She hugged herself more tightly, squeezed the tears of pain and fear and humiliation out of her eyes and burst out of the trees, out of the mist, into the wide end of the main street.

She staggered.

“Wakana?” someone asked.

Someone else yelled: “Wakana!”

It became a chorus, voices rising and mingling and roaring in her ears until all she could think about were her wounds – still oozing blood a little – and the monsters that had done this to her.

Someone tried to touch her. She flinched away.

She tried to walk straight but ended up stumbling along the muddy road to the square. Kazuo, her fiancé, rushed up to her, hands outstretched, but Wakana flinched away from him, too. She planted her palm on his chest and pushed him away, stronger than she should have been able to but her terror gave her strength in spades. She spotted the falconer’s son in the crowd (she should have known his name, but she only remembered that he had held her like he never wanted to let go). He watched her, and in the darkness she couldn’t be sure, but she thought he looked like he wanted to die. She held his eye for far longer than she should have.

But, there. There they were. The Ninja from the Land of Fire. They came here as if this was their country, as if they were allowed to do whatever they wished to. And maybe they were. If they had such power – who could stop them?

“Shinobi-sama!” she called out, hoarse voice breaking. One last stumble and she sank to her knees by the tall one’s feet. The leader’s. “Shinobi-sama, please!”

He grabbed her, pulled her up to her feet and spun them around. There were clinks of kunai deflecting thrown shuriken and Wakana winked out of existence as Naruto’s shinobi awareness, momentarily forcefully suppressed, came rushing back.

Wakana was just about Naruto’s height, but about only about two thirds of his body mass (her arms were spindly, her biceps practically non-existent, and even her bust was barely-there). Naruto nearly came up to a slouched Kakashi’s shoulder, but right now Kakashi was standing straight and using his body to shield Wakana from any potential danger, as though she were a real civilian.

Kakashi’s hands were velvet vise around Naruto’s upper arms. His torso was flat and hard and pressed against Naruto’s back, radiating heat even through the cushioning layer of the flak jacket. It was a devastating combination of gentleness and raw strength, and Naruto forgot to watch what was happening around him, because it suddenly occurred to him that he understood exactly what Iruka-sensei might have seen in this guy-

It was like having a shelter, except that it was a person.
Just sort of a ‘huh, Iruka-sensei’s man is a man’.

-and that made him want to dunk his head in a vat of bleach until it all went away. He liked it, that was the problem. It felt nice. If he forgot that this was Dog-taichou.

Eww. This was so creepy.

He could have gone his whole life without this traumatizing experience.

“Two down, taichou,” reported senbon guy.

The initial attacker was Naruto’s clone, as planned. But the follow up had come from a different direction – the maybe-Sound ninja were here and, wow, this couldn’t have gone better. Senbon guy and Nishi-sensei had it well in hand, though, so Naruto could go on pretending to be absolutely ineffectual, get himself ‘tragically killed’ and kawarimi with what was left of the real Wakana.

x

“Kirimaro-san,” Iruka said, patience rapidly nearing what promised to be an abrupt and explosive end, “I believe that you have stalled the proceedings long enough.”

He stood and placed his fingers lightly on the edge of the desk between himself and the Sound shinobi. It was all he could do not to betray how unnatural it felt to attempt to intimidate a man by whom he felt somewhat intimidated, but he drew on his teaching experience.

You could not let little children know they scared you. You could not let foreign ninja know they scared you. It was the same principle.

Kirimaro-san hung his head. “We were too late to save anything, anyway.” He allowed himself only a moment of grief before he shelved it away and looked upwards at Iruka, clear-eyed and resigned.

Iruka should have realised far, far sooner that Sound’s primary reason for agreeing to the peace talks was the hope that they might find and rescue their Kage. Fortunately, it had indeed been too late for anything like that.

This man’s devotion to (and the resulting grief for) Orochimaru still discomfited Iruka, but he respected another shinobi’s loss. Still, they had been chained to this desk for two weeks longer than necessary, Kimimaro-san’s health failed but his obstinacy persisted, and Iruka was about ready to resort to flashbang tags just to liven up the ennui. A part of him wanted to bust out the Big-Head jutsu and get this done.

He did not dare, though, far too terrified of what Hokage-sama would do him in retaliation for the ensuing diplomatic nightmare.

“I have a summary of the agreed terms here,” he suggested as mildly as he could, leafing through a stack of documents.

Kirimaro-san nodded, and reached for a pen. “Show me where to sign. And then let me borrow a few messenger birds – there are teams that need to be urgently recalled.”

x

The mountain village was glad to see the back of Team Kakashi, and Naruto didn’t really blame them. They were just like the people in Wave, in Tazuna-san’s village. All beaten down, tired,
hopeless, and the only thing that roused them even a little was when they discovered Wakana-san’s body and the pain for a moment trumped the tiredness.

Accepting that they couldn’t help here was the hardest for Naruto. He followed Dog-sensei (who smelled like mud and satisfaction and low-key sadness) with Juuji on his side and the two other teammates twenty yards behind him, talking quietly.

“Well done,” Dog-taichou said quietly, eyes tracking the tops of the trees around them. They were conifers this high up, so no good for travelling, but fair enough as a lookout.

“We only got one of them,” Naruto replied. It didn’t feel like all that good a job.

They barely even managed to convince the locals that it wasn’t Konoha who kept attacking them.

“Saa…” Kakashi tilted his head to the side, glancing at Naruto over his shoulder out of the corner of his eye. “Did we?”

“Got two,” Juuji confirmed.

Naruto shook his head. “The other one’s just wounded. If they were going to leave him behind, they already would have.”

“They know they can’t outrun us,” argued the ninken. “And they know they can’t hide from us.”

That was true. Even if they had only seen three or four dogs with the Konoha group, they couldn’t hope to get away short of scaling the tall cliff-sides down to the bottoms of deep ravines and then trying to run on the rapids. With an injured team member.

“Ah,” Naruto said. Ambush, then. This was like the road to Wave. Except that here there were puddles everywhere. Lot of rain. And mud. Inari, the mud. Everywhere. “Eny, meeny, miney, mo…” Naruto recited under his breath, counting the puddles that were within kunai-throwing range.

Dog-taichou must have listened closely, because he huffed a laugh, as if he could follow the track Naruto’s mind had taken.

“Do the guys know to expect it, or will you pretend to be killed again to see how we react?” inquired Naruto.

Kakashi huffed another laugh, and then said: “Let’s see what news Iruka is sending us.”

What? Naruto thought.

The look Juuji gave him agreed wholeheartedly, and added something about Kakashi’s mental stability.

That, Naruto knew, was a trap. Dog did this on purpose, so that people would think he was crazy whenever he was being brilliant.

As the road twisted around a huge rock, its next stretch came within sight, and on it a group of three ninja. A kunoichi was holding her comrade upright; the other guy stood two yards in front of them, in a position to defend and shield their retreat, but also a little handicapped by the fact that there was a Leaf hawk sitting on his forearm.

Naruto hadn’t smelled them in advance because they smelled like mud, and everything around smelled like mud. He could get a faint whiff of blood now, but that was only because blood had a
very distinctive smell, the wounded guy had bled a lot, and Naruto’s nose was trained to look for it.

“Konoha?” asked the front ninja, as though they couldn’t see the hitai-ate. But with his head all bandaged like that, and only one eye, maybe he couldn’t see so good.

“Oto?” Dog responded in kind.

The enemy were wearing their own forehead protectors, too. Who even knew if they had forged, stolen or henged the Konoha headbands they had worn before?

Naruto moved a little further off, so that he wouldn’t get into Dog’s way if there was a fight. He signed to Juuji to hold back and observe; at least a couple of Dog’s huntmates were surely around, somewhere between the rocks and the trees, and they weren’t engaging either. Naruto had a few clones around, oiroked into… well… wild goats, which was the most practical shape for them (he was going to learn how wings worked one of these days – believe it! – and then it would be all birds, all the time). Besides, goats really did have nearly three hundred and sixty degrees vision.

Incidentally, Naruto might have given them names. Chosen totally randomly. Totally.

Neji-yon dispelled and gave him a set of memories. The three ninja were surrendering, and they had no other allies around. The area was clear of traps, too.

Senbon guy gestured Nishi-sensei to stop before they rounded the rock; they remained just out of sight of the enemy.

“We’re being recalled,” said the Sound leader. “Our villages have signed a truce, and our mission has become obsolete.”

“Couldn’t fucking get it done a day earlier!” snarled the kunoichi. “Then Abumi would be-”

“Fuck Abumi!” snapped the injured guy. “My leg is fucked-”

“Say another word. I’ll drop you right here with your fucked leg and let you make your way back on your own.”

The guy looked about ready to rip her throat out with his teeth, but he clenched his jaw and shut up.

Their squad leader scowled at them both. “We accepted this mission for a reason. We were ready to give our lives for the chance to recover Orochimaru-sama. The mission is a failure, but not because we failed to divert Konoha’s attention.”

Wow. Maybe not all Sound shinobi were complete buttholes?

The leader let the hawk fly over to Kakashi, who unstrapped a second, still sealed missive from the Hokage’s office, read it, and nodded in confirmation.

“There is no more reason for us to fight,” Kakashi announced.

It still wasn’t the same as in Wave, when he and Zabuza agreed to lay down their arms. Zabuza had become, for a very short while, their comrade (don’t think about Haku, Naruto reminded himself, not now), but these people were still only a decision to not give a damn about politics away from attacking.

The Sound leader gave them a shallow bow. “Nice to meet you… friends.”

I hope you trip and fall on your own kunai, Naruto thought, but he said nothing. It was up to Dog-
And Dog-taichou solved the diplomatic nightmare with flair typical for him. “Always happy to have more friends. This brings back memories of my youth. What was it they used to call me…? I can never remember. Old age, huh?” He scratched at his silver hair (how did he not have mud in it? even Nishi-sensei had mud in his hair!) and eye-smiled.

Coupled with the nickname that nobody used anymore (but everybody seemed to remember) *Nakama no Goroshi* – Friend-Killer – it had a sufficiently chilling effect despite the outward civility.

“How about we talk about the future instead of the past,” suggested the Sound leader.

“But,” Kakashi protested with false innocence and a false eye-smile, “your future depends on talking about your past?”

His falsely clueless voice gave Naruto the heebie-jeebies, and it seemed to have an even worse effect on the Sound nin.

Dog kept smiling, “Oh, I know. *How about* you give me a detailed report on your current mission, and I will graciously give you an escort to help you find your way home?”

The sun and breeze in collaboration finally dispersed the mist, and around noon the largest port in the country turned into a beehive of activity. Shikamaru found it interesting enough to stop being bored for a while. By the time he arrived at the building that housed the port authority and customs, he noticed three ships used for smuggling and one that pirates kept as a front for selling their loot.

Shikamaru’s task was to acquire the list of vessels that departed within the last twenty-four hours (which was the conservative estimate of when ‘Uchiha’ arrived in this port town) and their destinations.

“Heavy in the arse,” Shikamaru muttered to himself, sidling up to the next building.

Even an intimidated civilian wouldn’t just give him records, and Konoha shinobi had no authority in the Land of Water. Worse, if they tried anything, the local shinobi would descend on them, and even though life was troublesome, Shikamaru didn’t want to die.

The more important administration buildings usually had some wards to detect Henge and the like; Uchiha-decoy had intelligently picked a big, important and busy port, and Shikamaru didn’t know enough about fuuinjutsu to even guess at what to look for, so going in as someone who belonged was out. Which left him with his least favourite option: putting in effort.

Shikamaru shrouded himself in his shadows and scaled up the side of the headquarters of a marine transport company. He waited wedged between the open storm shutters until the office opposite emptied.

The clerks left for their lunch break preoccupied with their inane chatter; Shikamaru hopped across the alley and manipulated a shadow to open the window from the inside.

His Mother may never know. Technically it was intermediate manipulation of the wind element (he was working on the fine motor skills) combined with the Nara Shadow jutsu, and he’d just as well take the fact that he could do this to his grave.

Let’s see, he thought, strolling in between desks and heading for the door to the hallway. If I were a
bureaucrat pocketing half of my budget for the construction of the building, where would I put the office with the departure logs?

They sat down around a fire. Its warmth and the pheasant being roasted over it raised the team’s morale enough that Genma felt comfortable to bitch about not spending the night at an onsen. Nishi-sensei lamented never having had the chance to try out an onsen with a natural hot spring.

Naruto sat silently, watching the bird sizzle and absenty rubbing the flaking mud off of his vest.

Maybe Kakashi shouldn’t have allowed the fire tonight. If they still weren’t annoyed enough at him to band together, he was going too easy on them.

At least he had the satisfaction of watching all three of them jump when Pakkun summoned himself.

“We followed them half-way to Konoha, Kakashi. They plan to meet up with a few other teams and then return to the Land of Rice Fields.”

Kakashi nodded. So the surrender was genuine. He was a little surprised – most of the Sound shinobi he had encountered struck him as the type to go down taking as many others with them as possible rather than survive. The type that didn’t have anything left to survive for.

He was glad to have been wrong in this instance.

He pulled out a kunai, cut off the pheasant’s wing – it looked cooked enough – and offered it to Pakkun. The three pairs of hungry eyes following the piece of meat made him smile contentedly.

“Debrief,” he ordered, casting a genjutsu that made it look like he was sitting there, empty-handed, with a mask covering his face. Then he pulled down his mask and took a bite of the pheasant’s breast. Under-seasoned, in his opinion, but good enough.

Naruto shot him an accusatory look, and for that Kakashi had the genjutsu point at him to go first.

“It went according to plan until the point when my clones attacked us,” Naruto said over the growls of his stomach. “The squad I left to flank us was supposed to, you know, kill Wakana-san, so I could switch with the body, but it got taken out by two of the Sound people…”

The boy obediently went through the whole battle and its aftermath, and his eyes only occasionally strayed to the dinner that awaited on the other side of this production. He filled in a few details Kakashi hadn’t been aware of. Judging by the way Nishi-sensei kept blinking, he had been aware of only about two thirds of everything going on. Good going for someone who hadn’t been in the field in years, but Kakashi hoped to see improvement there.

Genma, of course, wasn’t nearly that easy to read.

“…and then Nishi-sensei put out the house they set on fire with that cool water jutsu and while everyone stared I took the chance and kawarimi’d. Annai said nobody saw, but by then she was this shivering green and brown ball of mud, and didn’t have a lot of chakra left, so I sent her home,” Naruto concluded.

Annai, as far as Kakashi could tell, was on gennin level still, so it made sense to relieve her of duty at that point. This wasn’t a mission for gennin.

Kakashi was a little worried about how Naruto was going to react to the less immediate impact of what they were doing, but time would tell. He nodded in acceptance of the report and turned to
Genma. “Now you.”

Pakkun pressed closer to Kakashi’s hip and grinned around a bone in his maw.

Kakashi was glad to have him there. It was always nicer to torture the subordinates in front of an appreciative audience.

The pheasant happily sizzled.

x

“Taichou,” said Toge-san, “this harbor is full of boys that fit the description, even if Uchiha didn’t disguise himself. Circa fourteen, black hair, black eyes, physically strong. There is about hundred and fifty of those working in the docks right now. There are so many people that I could not track his scent – I can only confirm that he did come here.”

“I have not located him either,” reported Tomoko-san.

“Did he leave on a ship?” asked Shikamaru’s Mother.

Shikamaru continued pretending that he was napping in the corner of the roof he had claimed for himself. He had endured his allotment of Nara Yoshino’s wrath after he had brought her a two-page-long list of possible destinations where Uchiha could have gone if he had left on a ship, if he had ever stepped foot into this port, which Shikamaru was fairly sure wasn’t the case.

“I cannot say,” replied Tomoko-san.

Toge-san shrugged. “Yasha and I will circle around the harbor once more. If we don’t pick up another trail, I’d bet on a ship.”

“Go do that.”

After Toge-san and his ninken were gone, Shikamaru’s Mother cursed under her breath so colourfully that some of the sailors passing by in the street below would have blushed if they could hear her, and Tomoko-san shifted disapprovingly. “That’s a mission fail, then.”

x

Jiraiya did his best to ignore the way the whole ship rocked; he locked himself in his cabin and face-planted onto the bed.

“Yeowch, kami-damnit!”

He should have done a softness check. It was just a plank of wood under a blanket! Cheapskates!

He bundled up his cloak to serve as a pillow and closed his eyes. He’d think about how to make sure Yoshino-chan never found out how he gave her the slip later. Right now it was time to think about his newest novel.

Something about a, hmm, a young woman accused of a terrible crime, trying to aid her younger brother from the shadows while the brother relentlessly pursued her to take his revenge. But! She would have a reluctant but faithful protector who, mhm, so very many delicious opportunities for ravishing… and a nubile young noblewoman falling for her coarse bodyguard was a classic…

x
“How are you?” asked Rikku.

It was past midnight; Naruto had the second watch, and – apparently – Juuji had refused to go home until Naruto had called Rikku to keep him company instead.

They were good kids; they took care of one another.

Naruto sank lower, bracing his elbows against the needle-strewn ground. “I’m fine, Rikku,” he said quietly, keeping their conversation private and not disturbing his teammates’ sleep. His fingers carded through Rikku’s fur in slow, repetitive motions. “We did good. I’m sorry we were so late, and I’m sorry we couldn’t save Wakana-san, but all those people up there… maybe we gave them back a little of the faith they lost. And that’s worth it.”

“You don’t like lying,” Rikku mentioned.

Naruto met his eye and offered a smile that was not exactly happy, but nonetheless reassuring. “Eh. It’s not like that. Everybody lies; it’s a fact of life. I lie, too. All the time. And I’m really good at it, ‘cause Kana-san and Ya-san taught me how to do it right.”

“I know you have gone undercover before, Naruto,” Rikku said, unwilling to be deterred or distracted and allowing any hurt to fester. He was pulling this thorn out and letting the wound bleed freely to clean itself. “But you have never impersonated a dead woman to her family.”

“Right, heheh…”

“Naruto.”

“It’s okay. It really is. It wasn’t so good for a bit there, ‘cause they loved her a lot, even if she was a cheat and hurt the people who loved her, but she didn’t deserve that and they didn’t deserve to lose her and…” He paused and took a deep breath. “But that was something that happened without me, and all I could do was take it and try to make something good. I gave her death meaning by lying to them, and that makes the lying worth it.”

Rikku was proud of himself. Kana and Ya had done extremely well, too. They pulled this puppy out of a ditch, cleaned him up and fed him and trained him to be strong, sure, but what he felt so very intensely right now, looking at Naruto in the shifting dim red glow of the dying campfire, was the boy’s light. They had managed to save it.

Rikku pressed his weight into Naruto’s side and the boy took it with a fake, theatrical whoosh, wrapping an arm around Rikku’s torso. Fingers stroked along his side, unmindful of the scars.

Rikku settled down, pillowed his head on Naruto’s thigh and closed his eyes.

They had done well.
“What did Shikaku say?” asked Asuma-sensei.

Ino froze.

If they hadn’t heard her until now, any movement from now on might betray her presence. She remained standing on the stairs, holding her breath for a moment before she realised that it wasn’t really practical, and then exhaling and inhaling as quietly as she could manage.

Her Dad must have thought she wasn’t at home, else he would not have had such a free conversation with his friends in the living room. Especially not lately. They weren’t really speaking at the moment, Ino and her Dad.

The sad thing was that she knew they were both at fault for this argument, but she wasn’t going to budge until he at least acknowledged that his grudge was fifty percent made of jealousy and overprotectiveness, and that was a kind of additional weight Ino especially didn’t want to drag around while she tried to become a functional, independent kunoichi.

Ino was going to wait until her Dad said sorry – if for nothing else, then for not listening to her and dismissing what she told him because she was ‘just a girl who didn’t understand anything’.

“What do you think he said?” grumbled Ino’s Dad.

Three or four voices, some of them female, replied in unison: “Troublesome!”

Ino used the cover of the resulting laughter to sit down on the highest step and make herself comfortable. The stairs were low, so her knees came almost up to her chin. She hugged them and set her chin on top of her kneecap.

“No, really,” protested Asuma-sensei once the company had their laughter under control. “What did Shikaku say? Did the brat run off or was he abducted?”

Sasuke-kun!

Ino pressed her mouth to the meat of her thigh to muffle any sound she might involuntarily make. They were talking about Sasuke-kun! If anybody knew what really happened it would be her and Shikamaru’s dads!

“He’s waiting for Yoshino to come back,” Ino’s Dad said with a sigh. “Apparently it’s all inconclusive, and he’s frankly a lot more worried about that dead guy.”

“So, not ANBU after all?” asked Shibi-san.

“No. There’s no file for him,” admitted Inoichi, lowering his voice, “but the Hospital said he might have been one of the missing kids from about twenty years ago. So keep it quiet, and take it easy on Shikaku. He’s up a shit creek. They all are at the Tower.”

There was a while of silence. Ino tried to figure out what it all meant. She believed that Sasuke left to get away from Konoha. He had good reasons for it.

But what if he ran for his life?

What if he had been taken against his will?
The sad thing was, she couldn’t do anything. She didn’t have any relevant information to report, she would have been useless on any recovery mission, and she had never truly believed that Sasuke cared about her personally, so trying to convince him of anything would have been a waste of breath.

“I talked to Iruka-sensei again,” said Kurenai-sensei. “He’s still convinced that the boy is innocent, but he sounds like he’s desperately trying to believe his own party line.”

“Kurenai…” Asuma-sensei groaned. “Don’t go after that man alone. He’s-”

“A chuunin,” Kurenai-sensei pointed out coolly. “And obviously not a very good one, if he failed to spot two traitors.”

Ino wondered what it was about Iruka-sensei that worried Asuma-sensei. She knew Asuma-sensei well enough to be sure that he had a reason for his concern; he might have been nearly as lazy as Shikamaru, but he was also nearly as smart. The margin was wider on their intelligence than on their laziness, but for a non-Nara, Asuma-sensei was sharp as a tack.

“So, it’s looking increasingly like Uchiha really has done a runner?” concluded Chouji’s Dad.

Ino’s Dad sighed again. “Yes, well… I can’t deny that I wished for him to stay far away from my daughter, but I did not mean it this way.”

“This is disquieting,” muttered Shibi-san. “Why? Because I refuse to believe that we could not have prevented this.”

No shit, thought Ino, corner of lips pressed to the hem of her spandex shorts. She had meant to come down for a glass of water, not for another emotional punch to the gut. But, she knew, unless and until her Dad acknowledged that Sasuke-kun was not the bad guy (regardless of whether he had gone missing willingly or not), she wasn’t talking to him.

It wasn’t like he lacked people to talk to instead. Obviously.

x

“Oi, what the hell’s this?”

Sasuke had by now gained enough of an instinct for trouble in the dining hall that he put down the plate he had been rinsing, dried his hands on a towel, and snuck up to the archway to check out what was happening.

Tsujimoto-san was already there, sitting down at the table where three men were eating their late lunches. He seemed to know them – they were probably regulars. Sasuke recognised the one with the orange beard because… of reasons. The weirdest customers were the easiest to remember, and Sasuke was conditioned to look for orange and pink in any crowd.

“Something wrong, Ryou?” asked Tsujimoto-san, glancing at the man’s mostly full bowl.

Sasuke felt – nervous. He didn’t think he had messed up. He had tasted the stew, and it was alright. The man that had called out shook his head. “Nah, nothing wrong, man. Just, you know I’m not a picky eater – I’m fine with whatever, so…”

Tsujimoto-san was frowning. Sasuke wished he could stop feeling nervous.

“…but this is good.” Ryou the customer sounded surprised.
“Good?” Tsujimoto-san repeated, also surprised.

The orange-bearded man chuckled. “Yeah, way better than what we’re used to – no offence meant, you know.”

Tsujimoto-san, thankfully, didn’t appear offended. Apparently he wasn’t under delusions regarding what sort of an establishment he was running. “Good, huh?”

“What, did you get the girl some training or something?” asked the third customer, whose bowl was already almost empty.

“Nah. It’s just – her Mother’s not well, and I think she’s inherited it, whatever it is. Nothing catching, don’t make that face. I wouldn’t have her here if it was. Just…” Tsujimoto-san shrugged. “So I got in a boy to help her.”

“Right. I’ve seen him ‘round. Little grumpy lad,” said Orange Beard. “Thought he was just a temporary thing.”

“We’ll see-”

“If he cooks this good, you should keep him on!” insisted Ryou. “Better a grumpy good cook than a smiley bad one.”

Everyone around the table snorted, and Orange Beard concluded: “Not that the girl smiles much.”

Sasuke felt buoyed by the back-handed compliments, although he wished they had been about something other than his ability to heat up pieces of meat and vegetable.

“I apologise, Hinata-sama,” said Neji-nii-san, standing from the chair, “but I have to go.”

“Oh.” Hinata tried not to let her disappointment show – it was the first time in their lives that she and her cousin could talk so freely, share their experiences and their opinions and even some of their hopes and dreams – so every time they parted she was a little afraid that the Neji-nii-san whom she would encounter next time would be the old one.

The hateful one.

The one about whom she still dreamed sometimes. She wished it would go away – she had forgiven him, honestly, and she loved him – but the nightmares kept coming back.

“I have an appointment,” nii-san admitted. And then, tentatively, explained: “Anko-sensei has offered to teach me some of her skills. I hope you are not opposed-”

Opposed? Hinata was ecstatic! Was it possible that Anko-san had heard her out and decided to help her cousin? Oh, she would have to thank her!

“-to my receiving instruction outside of the Clan and my gennin team…?”

“Nii-san,” Hinata cried, reaching out to clasp his wrist, “if you need it, I will gladly cover for you with Father. As long as this arrangement is something you want.”

Neji-nii-san looked at her with an expression that she did not recognise on his face, before he nodded shortly. “It is.”
It took superhuman effort, but Tsunade managed to get Koharu out of her office without even once suggesting to her that she should go and sit on her tanbo. Once the door slammed shut on the departing puffed-up bag of self-importance, not even the combined powers of her Grandfather and Great Uncle could have stopped Tsunade from getting her well-deserved nightcap.

Shizune hesitated, glanced at the door, and instead of gifting Tsunade with the customary reproachful look she stepped closer to get her own cup of stress-reducer.

“Do you like Konoha, Shizune?” Tsunade asked as they downed their first shots and she leaned over to pour the second ones.

There was a while of silence. That was expected. It was not a trick question, but it nonetheless was tricky.

Eventually, looking out of the window at the lights of the night city spreading far, far out into the forests and plains, Shizune said: “…yes. Yes, I do, Shishou.”

Tsunade huffed. “Stop making that face. I’m not asking you to apologise for having a preference.” This time when she drank, she actually tasted the sake. “Do you want a hitai-ate, Shizune?”

They both knew that, if tested, Shizune would be made a tokubetsu jounin.

The woman shrugged and then looked back over her shoulder. She somehow still found it in herself to smile at Tsunade, which was nothing short of a miracle. “No. Not really.”

Tsunade humphed. “I don’t like setting the precedent of having a civilian in such a high-ranking position-”

“A high-ranking position, Shishou?” Shizune asked with that deceptively confused look of hers that made people fall over themselves giving her information out of the mistaken assumption that they were explaining entirely new concepts to her.

Tsunade didn’t fall for it. This was made easier by the fact that she was uncomfortably close to sober at the moment.

Shizune gave it up after a while and smiled. “Well, I hardly think that shinobi credentials are needed for the position of your baby-sitter, Hokage-sama.”

And, somehow, by the time Tsunade decided to get out of the damn Hokage chair and pound her apprentice into the floor to teach her some respect, the woman was gone.

Something woke Sasuke in the middle of the night.

He blinked into the darkness. The door, right in front of him, was as they had left it – barred and bolted. There were no overnight guests, and the bar had been closed, cleaned and locked hours ago.

A whimper sounded behind him.

Sasuke gritted his teeth against his body’s automatic impulse to pull the tanto from under his pillow and push up into a crouch to face the enemy head on. He remained lying, tense, and listened for any other sounds.
There was another whimper, which tapered off into the softest whine that human ears could catch.

She was trying to not make a sound, Sasuke realised. Oh. He did not have the training for this. He had not been out in the field enough to develop the ability to sleep silently, and… it has been a long time since he might have disturbed someone at home even if he screamed.

A sharp intake of breath was cut off with a slapping sound.

When Sasuke rolled over he found Natsuko with her own hand blocking both her mouth and her nose, choking herself.

What was he supposed to do? Wake her? Would she hurt herself? Doubtful – she had been living on her own before he had arrived. This could not have been anything new…

He waited. Within a minute Natsuko’s hand fell limply to the covers, and her ragged breathing calmed down to a semblance of regularity.

Selfishly, Sasuke was glad he was not the only one. He had worried about waking her with his own nightmares. He didn’t want to be a nuisance, didn’t want her concern and didn’t want to expose himself to ridicule. He was not a child. Dreams were irrelevant.

There were only ambitions and steps one was willing to take to achieve them.

Sasuke closed his eyes and tried to fall asleep again. Exhausted as he was, it didn’t take him long.

In the morning Natsuko didn’t show any signs of the distress she had experienced at night. There were no lines of tension, no dark circles under her eyes. She looked perfect the way Senju Tsunade looked perfect – artificial.

It was not make up. At the Academy Sasuke had unintentionally become proficient at distinguishing make up.

It wasn’t an illusion either. Natsuko seemed to him the same as ever. Did she have nightmares every night?

He was so very tempted to at least catch a glimpse of her with the Sharingan… But he wasn’t Naruto. He didn’t have the compulsive need to stick his nose into everything. He had impulse control, and he could put the mission before his curiosity. Aside from that, he was fairly sure that Natsuko would consider it a betrayal, and he would lose her respect if not her tutelage as well.

It was not worth the risk.

x

“Go home,” ordered Shikamaru’s Mother as soon as the team cleared the gates. “I’ll report to the Tower. Write your reports, and file them today.”

The emphasis was unnecessary. Shikamaru already had most of the thing composed, because travelling was ultimately extremely boring. Travelling with a trio of experienced older shinobi who rarely spoke was soporific.

Since Shikamaru did not want to faceplant due to a spontaneous onset of somnolence, he had had to keep his mind occupied with other matters.

“Don’t take it personally, Yoshi,” said Toge-san. “We’ve done all we could.”
Shikamaru could have lived his entire life without ever hearing his Mother addressed as ‘Yoshi’.

“Indeed,” agreed Tomoko-san. “It has been a pleasure to work with you, Shikamaru-san.”

“Likewise,” Shikamaru grumbled. It wasn’t very honest of him, but at least his Mother would not yell at him for it. Probably. Later, though.

He idly waved to the three adults and ambled down Southward Street toward the Clan grounds. It was not quite noon yet, so he could get his report done and then go find Chouji and Ino to catch up on the local gossip.

He got home without having to talk to anyone, grabbed a quick but thorough shower and sat on his bed in his sleeping yukata. Bracing the paper against a go board set on top of his thighs, he started writing – fast, simply putting down what he had already formulated. Until he came to the end of the form.

Shikamaru hesitated and then shrugged. It was unlikely that anyone would even read his report. He was the newbie chuunin, and the one member of the team who hadn’t actually done anything remarkable for the duration of the mission.

He flipped the paper to the ‘additional remarks’ section and wrote: ‘I don’t have any concrete evidence, but it is my opinion that the target went in the opposite direction than the trail we tracked – possibly toward the Land of Rain, but more likely Rivers. I recommend asking Uzumaki Naruto whether target made contact.’

From what little Shikamaru did remember about the guy, Uchiha Sasuke was a walking case of learned (and well-founded) misanthropy, who used his own (considerable) talent and associated arrogance as a shield against socialisation. Shikamaru thought that if his entire clan was murdered and the village had abandoned him to a life of fending off predators before he had recovered from the shock, he wouldn’t have stuck it out nearly as long.

Huh, looked like revenge was a positive motivator for once.

X

“You have a tattoo.” Sasuke said, adding a couple of bowls to the stack Natsuko was washing. “I only just noticed.” Perhaps he should have noticed earlier, but the tattoo was on the back of her neck, and Natsuko usually wore her hair loose. A thin black line twisted into ornamental shapes would have been nigh on impossible to notice through the curtain of dark hair.

“So I do,” Natsuko replied shortly over the splashing sounds of dishes being rinsed.

Sasuke interpreted that as a refusal to share further information on the topic. Perhaps it was a reminder of an unpleasant past experience.

None of his business anyway. Unless he wanted to get a tattoo himself, and he was quite sure that wasn’t his style. Now if he could get access to some nail polish… black, or perhaps indigo… Hm.

Too bad civilian boys didn’t wear nail polish. Sasuke didn’t feel quite up to maintaining a Henge for a full shift – not with the kinds of distraction he had to expect at the inn.

“And you have waiting customers,” Natsuko reminded him.

Sasuke didn’t know why he cared. He did not want to care. He did not want to know more about her; did not want to get embroiled in whatever it was she and Jiraiya were doing here, and he
definitely did not want to waste his time thinking about her *irrelevant* nightmares and her *irrelevant* tattoo.

“Oi! Boy! Where’s mah beer?”

Sasuke went to retrieve a beer mug and fill it. It was more difficult to not contaminate it in response to the polite, respectful request than one would expect. Sasuke set it on the table, foam-cap intact, saliva-free, and did not blast the little insignificant worm in human skin with even a sliver of killing intent.

“ Took your time, ha?!”

Die in a fire, Sasuke thought.

He swallowed. And mimed a shallow bow. “Excuse me.”

When he returned to the kitchen, Natsuko looked away from the dishes and gave him one of her rare half-smiles.

Sasuke did not want to care that she was proud of him.

But, apparently, *wanting* had little to do with it.

x

“Nara Shikamaru?” asked the messenger gennin approaching the porch.

Shikamaru opened one eye and glared up at the sky.

Hello, cumuli. Goodbye, cumuli.

“That’s me,” he confirmed.

“Urgent summons from the Hokage Office.”

Shikamaru groaned and rubbed his eye with his fist. He hadn’t intended to wake up all the way today, but the new Hokage was as bad as a week of his Mother in one day, so there went his blithe somnolence.

“Roger that,” he grumbled, and waited until the guy was gone on his way before he dragged himself up to his feet and stumbled into the house.

Ten minutes later he was at the Hokage Tower, hopefully resembling a wakeful person. If she sent him out on a mission, he was going to have to down a gallon of coffee before he set out. Then he would get sick but, to be fair, vomiting did tend to wake him right up. Adrenalin, huh.

“ In here, Nara,” snapped Tsunade-sama’s voice through a door left cracked open.

Behind it wasn’t the Hokage Office (Shikamaru liked this development, because the likelihood of impending mission assignment just plummeted). It was one of the small planning slash conference rooms; this one seemed to be half run-over by Archives, and as Shikamaru stepped over the threshold he noticed some very impressive security sealwork on the door and walls.

Troublesome, he mused. There was still the hope that the Hokage hadn’t bothered to get away from her current activity to deal with him, but just the fact that she was speaking to him personally made his hair rise.
What was he getting sucked into now?

“Sit,” barked Tsunade-sama, feet on the desk and face hidden behind a report. “Read.” She lobbed a scroll at him.

Shikamaru caught it. He pushed the nearest chair into a new position so that the angle wouldn’t allow him to see up the woman’s kimono, no matter how unfortunately she might move. There was trauma he didn’t need, like for example a chakra-reinforced punch to the head for something that wasn’t his fault in the first place. Prevention and preclusion were the way to avoid future trouble.

Laziness through effort. Aggressive optimalisation. Somewhere overhead drifted cumuli that he could have been watching if he had been any better at either.

The scroll was a copy of his report on the failed Uchiha Retrieval mission. Someone had taken a red pen to it – not Iruka-sensei (Shikamaru knew that man’s handwriting), but it still gave him flashbacks of the Academy.

“Interesting reading,” said the Hokage from behind her paper shield. “I’ll have to keep an eye on you, chuunin.”

Shikamaru shuddered.

The woman lowered the report and looked at him over the top of it. “Memorise the marked parts. They’re classified. And by classified I mean from the rest of the team involved as well. Good job on undermining your mission commander; don’t do it again, but this time we got lucky.”

Shikamaru’s mind translated this, and the picture it formed for him was full of espionage and melodrama. And someone marginally clever trying to salvage Uchiha Sasuke as a loyal-ish shinobi. He leaned over and let his forehead thunk against the desk.

His Mother might have loved him, but she lived to make his life unnecessarily difficult.

Tsunade-sama laughed at him.

x

“Iruka-kun! Is that you?! It’s been such a long time!”

“Can I help you?” Iruka asked, looking up from his food. He had intended to enjoy his meal as much as he could, listening to Hokage-sama’s shadow clone’s yet another unexpectedly dryly humorous rendition of an old mission – this one involving Kakashi’s Father.

Sadly, with this intrusion, he was forced to put on his civil face. While eating.

“Don’t you remember me?” asked a short man with a paunch and a halo of graying hair surrounding a gleaming bald spot. “Watanabe Omura! I was friends with your parents!”

Was he, Iruka thought sardonically.

He set his chopsticks down and affected as much cluelessness as he could without coming off as outright mocking. “Were you? I am sorry. It has been such a long time since they died. It is good to know that you have fared better. How have you been in the past fourteen years?”

The man nervously clutched his bag to his paunch. “Err… it’s been hard. Real hard. Kiku-chan didn’t… well. It’s just been hard.”
Iruka thought he might have remembered Watanabe Kiku – there was a faint impression of a butterfly tattoo. He wasn’t sure if Watanabe-san was implying that she had died, or that she had left him, or that she had not wanted anything to do with Iruka, but in the end it didn’t matter. To him, they were both strangers.

“I am sorry to hear that,” he said, with only the most perfunctory sympathy, just in case Kiku-san had indeed died.

“I was wondering…” Watanabe shifted his weight from one foot to the other and back. “I’ve heard about, you know, you – congratulations! – and I wanted to ask…”

Iruka watched him with the attentive, professional mien of a career paperwork ninja, and waited for him to either verbalise a request (which was almost certainly going to be something questionable or downright illegal) or give up and go on his way.

Watanabe chose the second option.

Iruka bade him farewell and watched him go – an older, stooping man weighed down by resignation. He didn’t feel good about the rejection, but he wasn’t going to let himself be pulled in any sort of dishonest dealing – especially not for someone who tried to capitalise on their friendship with Iruka’s parents, but who couldn’t be bothered to even contact those parents’ orphaned son until said son gathered enough personal power to be of use.

“That was well managed,” said Tsunade-sama’s clone.

Iruka inclined his head. “Unfortunately, I have had a lot of practice at this sort of thing lately.” He might have to start going out under a Henge, the way Hokage-sama did when she did not want to be approached. Ninja, of course, saw through the pretence, but it was the height of rudeness to ignore the warning such a genjutsu presented.

“That is the price we pay,” agreed the Bunshin. “You will get used to it.”

“With all due respect, Hokage-sama, I would prefer to go back to my calm and extremely rewarding occupation as an Academy teacher, and leave all these encounters far behind me.”

The Bunshin laughed. Iruka was fairly certain that he had heard Tsunade-sama laugh before – in Tanzaku Gai, at Naruto, she had definitely laughed then, even if her life ever since offered so few opportunities for merriment – so why did she sound different now? Was she censoring herself in front of him? Was it part of the privacy transformation she used so she could get through her lunch without being harassed?

It could not have been the mere fact that they were in public. Tsunade-sama was not the type to care about propriety in front of anyone short of foreign diplomats, and even those she sometimes treated like Iruka treated errant children.

“We all have dreams, Umino,” the clone said sardonically. “The only one I have ever heard of fully achieving theirs was Namikaze Minato – and you know how that story ended.”

Iruka didn’t argue. He personally couldn’t think of anyone else achieving all their dreams either. He just hoped that his past experience of semi-successful dream-achievement and the humbleness of this particular dream would give him a head start when it came to the re-achieving part.

“Ano sa, Dog-taichou-“
Senbon guy stumbled over nothing, almost choked on his senbon and only narrowly avoided faceplanting into a scrub.

“Definitely ANBU teammates,” Naruto muttered under his breath.

“What is it, Puppy-chan?” asked his commanding officer in that sort of obsequiously happy voice that he only used as the last warning before violence commenced.

Naruto quietly shuddered and hoped that he would remember not to use the nickname again. “Juuji says they’ve got a trail. Real Sand ninja this time. People we know – from the Chuunin Exams.”

Kakashi thought it through for a while and then nodded. “Take point.”
Sugar and Spice

“This assignment is nothing like I imagined,” said Nishi-sensei as they ran through a gap between two mountain peaks, trying to minimise the time they spent in clear sight.

The Sound team had gone home, and this track was a couple of days old, but it didn’t mean there weren’t any enemies around.

“Are we seriously following the kid?” groused senbon guy.

And that was it. That was enough. Naruto had reached his limit.

Sure, he tried to be nice and friendly and patient, but at some point he had to stand up for himself, or they would think he was a doormat and treat him that way forever. He waited until they reached the tree line and let loose: “Look, senbon guy. I get that you have a problem with me. Most everyone does. I could count the people in Konoha who don’t on my fingers, and still have thumbs left over.”

Juuji increased his pace and joined Kakashi-taichou, who ran slightly ahead.

“But,” Naruto pressed on, “we’re trying to prevent a war here, so if you could pack it up and pretend that I’m just a random ninja you’ve never heard of before, it could save all our lives.”

“Are you usurping me again, chuunin-kun?” asked Dog-taichou, slowing down so that he wouldn’t have to shout.

Uuhei huffed under his breath and, together with Juuji, moved forwards to scout the trail.

“You weren’t doing anything, taichou,” Naruto pointed out. “If that was some kind of a strategy you should have told me ‘cause, unlike Iruka-sensei, I can’t read people’s minds.”

“Iruka can read minds?!” exclaimed senbon guy. Then groaned, rubbing his forehead under the edge of his bandana. “That explains so much.”

“I know, right?” Naruto replied, automatically accepting a mark’s assumption and smoothly integrating it into his persona. Served the guy right for failing at sarcasm. He turned back to Kakashi. “So, like, it’s your show, except that if you don’t tell me what to do I’ve gotta make it all up myself. I’m pretty good at that, so it’s okay with me, but senbon guy and Nishi-sensei don’t seem all happy with that.”

“Why is he Nishi-sensei and I’m senbon guy?” complained senbon guy.

“Natural charisma,” deadpanned Nishi-sensei.

In fact it had a lot more to do with being a medic nin and the scalpel-related threats he had issued.

“If you’ve got the energy to argue, you can run faster,” pointed out Kakashi-taichou, and upped the pace.

Senbon guy grumbled, but at least he was glaring at taichou now and stopped making stupid remarks about Naruto.

Sasuke had never before considered the true breadth of use for ninja wire. He had had his eyes
opened, though, and was now up to little tricks with it.

It did, however, as Natsuko had warned him, require excellent chakra control. He was improving by the day, but he still had a long way to go before he would even attempt catching the wire with his bare hands.

He decided to take a break from focusing and go for a run, when he noticed that his teacher was a little preoccupied with something other than his training. Not that he minded – he only needed occasional pointers, not constant supervision.

“You’re writing to Jiraiya?” Sasuke inquired, gathering the wire in neat coils. Natsuko had lent him her gloves; his hands still fit into them, but within a few months they would not anymore.

“No.” After a brief hesitation she said: “This is for… Kisame.”

Sasuke didn’t think he had heard that name before. It was probably some aristocrat in an important office, or a courtier close to a daimyo, or something of the sort. What kind of people would be of interest to Jiraiya’s network?

“Is that your target?” he asked.

“My mark,” Natsuko corrected. “We call them marks. And yes, he is. But he is also…” She gripped a fistful of the dark grey woolen sweater she was wearing in her snow-white fist. “…a friend. In our line of work these things often mix up.”

Sasuke wondered if either of those descriptors – ‘mark’ or ‘friend’ – translated to lover. He made the decision to not ask. He wasn’t entirely certain if that was something he could accept without… feeling uncomfortable. Maybe even angry. At least not now. Perhaps later, when he became more inured to the realities of intelligence work (this was exactly what he had feared would be expected of him, and the mere idea was still more than he could abide).

“Sometimes,” Natsuko continued, choosing to turn the semi-confession into a lesson, “your cover requires you to become close to someone. And I do not mean it in the obvious way – we have seduction specialists for that, which I am emphatically unqualified for–”

Sasuke suspected that she could be a devastating seductress if she chose to be; however, she seemed to share his own opinion of that kind of expertise. If asked he would say – truthfully – that he respected those ninja’s work, but he could not imagine himself in their place without feeling sick.

“…but in the way a team becomes close. You face adversity together. Perhaps you save one another’s lives. And even though your reasons for doing so are a lie, the act of risking yourself for another remains true.”

Sasuke nodded. The almost-friendship developed between him and Naruto had sprung from mutual life-saving on a mission, too. “Of course you feel something. Only a sociopath wouldn’t.”

Natsuko gave him one of her rare smiles. “I have been called that a time or two.”

Sasuke shrugged. “What do we care for the opinions of the blind and the brainless?”

“I don’t want to go home,” Ino admitted.

Dad was at home, and the ringing silence persisted.
She watched the deer around them. The animals couldn’t be bothered with expending effort on anything; they walked around a bit, chewed grass, and once in a while stared at whatever caught their attention.

Ino had always thought that Shikamaru was basically one of them, only born in a wrong shape.

“You’ve got a standing invitation, you know that,” Shikamaru reminded her. He was lying on his back, looking straight upwards through eyes so narrowed they were more like slits. He was chewing on a blade of grass.

“We haven’t had a team sleepover in years!” Chouji exclaimed, getting excited for the idea.

“We’re not a team anymore,” Shikamaru reminded him in turn.

“Bull,” Ino snapped. She had been the one to protest the sleepovers, once the ‘boys are gross’ stage hit her. They had grown apart, a lot, but she had always known that she would be assigned on the same gennin team with them, and they had never actually lost that unthinking, easy loyalty that had been instilled in them from the cradle. They had been a team since before they knew what ‘team’ meant, and they would be a team regardless of who got promoted or reassigned.

Ino and Chouji just had to catch up to Shikamaru.

They fell silent for a while. Shikamaru watched the clouds, Ino watched the deer and Chouji delved into another packet of chips. Eventually Ino couldn’t take it anymore.

“Did he really desert?” she asked. She hadn’t wanted the boys to think that this was the only reason why she had organised their outing; especially not after they got together and it felt so good (so very good – how could she have forgotten how much she used to enjoy this?), but the question weighed too heavily on her.

Shikamaru spat his blade of grass, plucked another and stuck it between his teeth. “Yes.”

Ino nodded. That was it. That was all, it was done, mystery solved, question asked and answered, and even though she hated the answer she got, it was good to have it. Now she could stop worrying about Sasuke-kun and start focusing on more important things.

Somehow.

“I… I did love him, you know,” she muttered – and mustered a smile for Chouji, who reacted oh-so-predictably by placing a handful of chips into her palm. “Or thought I did. Thought of little else for a while. But then it turned into kinda fun group activity, and then it turned into a fun social experiment.”

“How far can you push a grossly traumatised orphan before he snaps, and how much murder will that snapping include?” drawled Shikamaru.

Ino wished, for only a moment and very abstractly, that Shikamaru had been a girl. Because that way Ino wouldn’t have ditched him, and could have benefitted from his perspective during the Sasuke-kun-craze. “I didn’t… expect him to actually… like… snap.”

“Really, Ino?” asked Shikamaru, opening one eye to look at her blearily. “Really?”

“I…”

“Thought it would be violent? An interesting case study?”
“No!”

“Then what? What?”

“Er, Shika…?” Chouji spoke up uncertainly. It was very rare that Shikamaru managed to muster up the energy for this sort of emotional expression, so it was no wonder that they were worried.

“I was just being an idiot!” Ino exclaimed, throwing her arms up. The chips from Chouji sailed through the air and landed in the undergrowth mere inches from one of the deer (who sniffed at them curiously, licked the salt off them, and then left them lying there). “I didn’t think about the consequences at all. I didn’t even think about him like a real person and, oh kami-sama, I am sorry… I was being so, so dumb…”

“I know you are, Ino,” Chouji assured her, patting her back very softly (obviously reacting to the ‘sorry’ rather than the ‘dumb’ which was Shikamaru’s to confirm).

Ino kind of loved Chouji for being a huge ball of fat. He was soft all over. Like a friendly cloud. And he made the perfect buffer for her and Shikamaru, because for all that Shikamaru came off as lazy and apathetic, both he and Ino were type A personalities.

Shikamaru simply had a very narrow scope of things he cared about, and preferred to leave the rest for other people to stress over.

Ino, on the other hand, needed to feel in control more than she needed actual control. They made the perfect team, when they weren’t exploding messily all over everything. It was Chouji’s task to keep them inert.

“Just don’t do it again,” Shikamaru concluded, and that was that.

Ino nodded, and grabbed a fistful of Chouji’s chips to stuff into her mouth. Her stomach would make her regret it, but whatever. Right now she just wanted to enjoy some damn chips.

Sasuke didn’t see the letter delivered.

When he had woken up, just past dawn, Natsuko had already been gone. She came in about half an hour later, flushed with exertion and holding a rolled-up piece of paper in her hand. She was smiling her signature half-smile, obviously thinking very hard of something.

Sasuke brewed the tea and started pulling out ingredients for breakfast. It would be at least an hour before Tsujimoto-san came down to eat, but it was easier to have it all ready in advance. And sometimes there were customers even this early.

“Good news?” Sasuke asked.

Natsuko nodded. The letter disappeared inside an undetectable pocket (or possibly a storage seal), and she moved closer to observe the food preparation. Sasuke took his cue and demonstrated that eggs were well within his abilities.

“Kisame?” he chanced, eyes focused on his chopsticks. Omelets were a little complicated.

“Yes,” Natsuko confirmed, sipping her tea. Her voice was unusually light. “We were supposed to undertake a mission to the Land of Tea together, but he went alone. He said he would make it look like I had come along.”
That was... startling.

A mission implied that Kisame was a shinobi rather than a highly placed civilian.

Sasuke folded the omelet and poured another ladle of the egg-mixture onto the pan. Natsuko’s mark must have had a very good reason or been very stupid to let himself be used like this. And Natsuko had to trust him a lot.

Sasuke wasn’t sure he would have trusted Naruto for something like this, and he trusted Naruto more than he had trusted anyone in years.

“You trust him?” he asked, dismayed by how childish it made him sound. He folded the omelet again.

“To a point,” Natsuko allowed. “As I said, Tomio-kun, our initial acquaintance may have been under false pretences, but much of what we do for one another is real.”

Sasuke suspected that there was a – to him indecipherable – emotional subtext, and decided to let it lie. Hopefully Natsuko knew what she was doing.

Most of the Land of Rivers, it turned out, was genuinely calm and quiet and empty of enemy shinobi. This was disappointing.

Kakashi had not had a good fight in months. Since Zabuza, actually (because he could not count his minute participation in taking down Orochimaru). This was probably his personal record.

Feeling glum and tired and bored, he came to the conclusion that he would rather have challenged Gai to a poetry writing contest than spent another night running, especially when they were obviously gaining on the Sand shinobi so fast. They could afford to take a break and have a little rest. And maybe, just maybe, this would be the opportunity his team needed to finally talk. He was ready to assign them D-rank missions – too bad there were none to be had in the middle of nominally hostile territory.

“You got any more of that, kid?” asked Genma, gesturing at Naruto’s backpack. Naruto had, somehow, managed get his hands on chocolate. He had shared (good boy!) without even being prompted.

“Sorry,” Naruto replied, shrugging. It wasn’t a no, so he presumably did have some left, but this rejection was still leagues better than his earlier outburst.

Kakashi recognised a manipulation technique when he saw one, and he was rapidly nearing the point of exasperation with Genma for the mere fact that Naruto felt like he needed to act like this. Nishi-sensei tried playing the peacekeeper, but he kept hitting a wall. If Genma just got over himself, they could start building the actual team.

Kakashi had not, in his most pessimistic estimations, expected this part of the process to take more than a month.

Genma liked kids. He was a team player. He was an insufferable mother hen. He had never expressed any sort of dislike for jinchuuriki. As far as Kakashi knew, Naruto hadn’t ever pranked Genma personally. So what was the catch here?

“Kakashi-san, how come you don’t have any bitches in your hunt?” Annai-chan asked quietly,
pulling him out of his frustrated contemplation (which he disguised as re-reading *Icha Icha Redemption*).

“Saa…” Kakashi glumly stared into the fire. If the question were simply whether to tell the truth and come across as a jerk or tell a lie and come across as a bigger jerk, he wouldn’t even hesitate – lies and maximum irritation were the surest way.

He was opening his mouth the claim that ‘Bisuke was bitchy enough to make up for the lack,’ when Annai-chan scoffed.

“You don’t have to tell me anything.” She turned away to examine the discarded pile of wild goat bones and viscera.

Annai was a young kunoichi in a world that still mostly belonged to manly shinobi (Tsunade’s forced appointment as Hokage notwithstanding) and, much as he disliked being looked up to as anyone’s mentor, Kakashi felt the hateful sting of responsibility.

“Saa,” he said pensively, “the ninken ladies are all very frightening—”

“Don’t hurt yourself,” Annai-chan cut him off before he could really get going. “I just have to look at your current team to know the answer.”

Yes, Kakashi had known that he would end up looking like a chauvinistic jerk. Oh, well. At least his faithful *Icha Icha* would not get mad at him for not being a Kurenai-level rabid feminist.

Some people just put form higher than function, which was a philosophy Kakashi’s self-preservation didn’t allow him to subscribe to. He picked the ninja he needed based on their abilities, regardless of their shape. The iryounin situation was out of his hands, and if this wasn’t an essentially peace-keeping mission, he would have gladly conscripted Yuugao instead of Genma (and thus spared himself the pain of dealing with Genma’s bullshit).

Besides, with Tsunade back in Konoha, anyone who would try to discriminate against kunoichi was signing their own warrant.

“Tsubame-chan, huh?” muttered Genma after Annai grabbed her loot and ran off to share with her brother.

Kakashi raised his *Icha Icha* a little higher.

Genma, not being completely stupid, took the tacit order and shut up.

The sex-scene faded into plain kanji in front of Kakashi’s eye.

Tsubame, huh?

Tsubame had been a member of Kakashi’s hunt, a long time ago. Before Team Minato. She, like a lot of Kakashi’s ninen, had also been a Pack pup, and Pakkun had treated her like an adopted niece. Guruko had had the funniest case of puppy love for her.

She had been one of the deadliest ninen Kakashi had ever met, specialised in flash-fast killing. She had therefore been Kakashi’s partner for several assassinations (even most war-hardened shinobi don’t expect a seven-year-old boy with a dog to be a deep-infiltration assassin, and Konoha knew how to make the best use of their people).

She was now one of his ghosts. Assassination gone wrong. Kakashi had staggered back after he had
killed the man who had bought him at the slave market. Tsubame bled out in the ditch and got fed on by rats.

The hunt had never gotten over the loss, and if ever there were eligible canine kunoichi looking for a unit to belong to, Pakkun just… didn’t mention them. The only ones who really minded were Buru and Bisuke, but after the fit Guruko had pitched last time the topic was raised, they just maintained the status quo.

And now Kakashi was going to blithely put it all out of his mind and focus on keeping watch, hidden behind porn like an improper shinobi.

“Don’t hit me,” Naruto said quietly. He sat down with his back against Kakashi’s and leaned on him, just hard enough to make himself unignorable.

“Need a cuddle, Naruto-chan?” Kakashi inquired mockingly, slamming the mental vault with memories shut before Obito could crawl out of it.

Kakashi could just imagine Naruto’s eye-roll, and it made him smile behind his mask (and behind his book) because it was such an Iruka reaction. He pretended not to see Genma and Nishi-sensei staring.

Naruto scoffed, quietly, and didn’t move an inch. He didn’t say another word, either. After all, both he and Kakashi knew who was the one smelling like grief. And when the dogs slunk over (Uuhei first, then Annai and Juuji and Shiba and Akino), piling up against their legs and hips, it lifted a little of the weight from Kakashi’s shoulders.

Besides, Genma’s and Nishi-sensei’s utter bemusement was gold.

Iruka was on his way to the Hokage Tower when a sharp whistle rent the air.

He reflexively dropped, took cover, and tried to figure out what was happening.

Whoever it was, they had miscalculated. The ringing in his ears was uncomfortable, of course, but it was not incapacitating. Iruka did not rely on his hearing so much that he would not be able to avoid senbon by sight. He jumped up to the nearest house, onto the window ledge, onto the roof, and over adjacent roofs (dodging two more senbon attacks) until he arrived at a vantage point from the old water tank, which he knew was one of the stationary ANBU postings.

Moments later there was an ANBU in between him and the assailants.

The assailants beat a retreat – the ANBU moved to pursue, but Iruka called him back. He did want to know, of course, but he had a suspicion already, and if he was correct, it would have meant certain death for the legitimate ANBU.

“Can you accompany me to the Hokage Tower, Boar-san?” he asked, trying to ignore the slivers of killing intent and reproach.

He had the authority to order ANBU. They did not like it. He was a chuunin, and skill-wise they were all his betters… This was his life now, though, and he was – shockingly! – still alive, and he was going to do his best to keep it so.

He made his way directly to the Tower and let himself in through the Hokage Office’s window, mimicking some of the most disrespectful jounin (not to name any names). He was so angry he was
ready to bust out the Big-Head jutsu; politeness could take a hike.

“Forgive the intrusion, Hokage-sama,” Iruka said, without an iota of apology in his tone. The Council of Elders was present in the Office, as they were wont to be, and Iruka did not spare them as much as a glance. The times when he had felt awe toward them were quite forgotten under the memory of them pestering Kakashi (as overworked and stretched thin as he had already been) with their petty bullshit (actually, fairly important but not urgent topics).

Their notion of priority was so skewed that they had no place anywhere near any tactical decisions – much less operative ones.

“This is going to be good,” muttered Tsunade-sama, rising from her chair. She briefly effected a purposely insincere regretful expression and bowed the Elders out with: “I shall give your proposal due consideration and send a message as soon as I arrive at a conclusion.”

She let the sentence hang in the air until the three old people had shuffled out of the room and the door was firmly shut behind them.

“Thank fuck,” Tsunade spat. “Want a shot, Umino?”

Iruka shook his head and watched with disenchantment as his esteemed leader poured and downed sake in a steady stream from the bottle to the cup to her mouth. It was almost artistic; it must have taken a lot of training before she could do it without spilling. He caught himself waiting for the clacking sound of a shishi-odoshi – but instead of it there was just a noisy swallow.

“So?” she demanded.

“There has been an assassination attempt on Umino-sama,” reported the ANBU, while Iruka was still searching for words.

This had never happened to him before; it was to be expected that he would be a little shell-shocked.

“Join the club,” said Tsunade-sama with a smidgen of earnest sympathy. “Just take it as a compliment. You’re doing such a good job that someone’s tried to have you killed-”

“Within Konoha?!” someone exclaimed. A moment later Iruka identified this someone as himself.

“Frankly,” she replied, “I’m shocked it took this long. I thought they would move as soon as Hatake was out of the village. Oh, well, guess they just weren’t taking you seriously until now…”

Could I go back to that? Iruka thought, but didn’t say so out loud. He had promised, hadn’t he? He was going to finish his work, and only then return to the Academy.

“You know what this means,” said Hokage-sama.

Iruka nodded, resigned. “ANBU guard.”

“ANBU guard,” she repeated in agreement. “Get it set up, Boar.” She flicked her wrist to dismiss the masked shinobi, who shunshined away.

Iruka listlessly sank into a chair to wait for his assigned bodyguard. His armour was not going to protect him from targeted assassination, and he wasn’t as stupid as to claim that he could deal with all this by himself.

He could not.
And he wasn’t as thoughtless as to let Kakashi come back to Konoha to his grave, if he could at all help it. Oh, kami-sama, Kakashi. He was going to murder his way through anyone in any way suspicious. It would be a lake of blood right in the centre of Konoha…

No. Kakashi, Iruka firmly decided, would *not* find out about this.

“Well… fuck,” said Guruko.

Bisuke concurred.
“Mornin’, Daisuke. How’s tricks?” a somewhat familiar voice addressed Tsujimoto-san from the bar.

Sasuke appeared like a ghost (or a trained shinobi), the way a good waiter should. “What is your pleasure, customer-san?”

Jiraiya glanced up at him over his shoulder and smirked. “I’ll have the wench serve me, boy. Off with you.”

Sasuke gritted his teeth; it was all he could do to keep a stranglehold on his killing intent. He bowed – sarcastically, and the Sage knew it – and shuffled off to switch with Natsuko in the kitchen.

He remained stuck there until well after noon, barely keeping any attention on his tasks; mostly he was occupied with trying and failing to listen in on Jiraiya and Natsuko’s conversations, and thinking about what he himself wanted to ask the spymaster.

Had there been any sightings of that man? Had he returned to Konoha in the meantime? Had he left any trails? A compound full of corpses, perhaps? – that tended to be a good indication that he had passed through town.

“Done with team training?” Anko asked, not bothering to curb her sarcasm.


Poor thing didn’t have a whole lot of time to get away between Gai and Hiashi, but he tried to get in as much after-class tutoring as he could. Shit, it was like no one had ever patted the kid on the head and showed him how to do any of the cool stuff.

“I’m off on a mission,” she told him. No further details – too high a classification, as was typical for ANBU – and he didn’t ask. Good boy. “I’m actually a clone. Yeah, we’re not doing anything chakra intensive or contact-based today. So… how are you on poisons?”

“Poisons?” repeated Neji-boy, tonelessness compromised by just a hint of wonder.

Anko grinned.

“Have there been any news?” Sasuke asked once he finally had the chance to speak to Jiraiya directly. If the old man tried to deliberately misunderstand, he would find that Sasuke was not another of those brainless bimbos he charmed into his service.

“Have you decided to stay, then?” inquired Jiraiya, lighting a pipe with equanimity that suggested he did not care about Sasuke’s answer either way.

Or that he already knew what the answer was going to be. That was more likely.

Sasuke clenched his fists, tried not to think of Natsuko’s lessons for fear that his eagerness might become noticeable, and nodded. “I’ll stay. If you keep your side of the bargain.”

Jiraiya raised an eyebrow at the word ‘bargain’, but instead of mocking Sasuke he shrugged. “Sure
thing, Uchiha-kun. Heard a few rumours about him visiting the Land of Tea, but if you ask me it’s bogus. Someone wanted to make it look like he was there, for whatever reason. In any case, we’ve had no confirmed battles in the past month, and I dare you to think of a way to conclusively identify the man outside of battle.”

Any doujutsu wielder had a far more reliable way of identifying any shinobi with their kekkei genkai, but Sasuke would have been wasting his breath if he had pointed that out to a ninja that had crawled out of the gutter. Jiraiya might have been strong, but he was a fluke (a lot like Naruto).

“Anyway, good job, kid!” the Sannin exclaimed, and slapped Sasuke on the back, hard enough to jar him despite Sasuke reflexively reinforcing his muscles with chakra. “Natsuko tells me you’ve adapted a damn sight better than we expected. We might make an operative out of you yet. Ha-ha-ha!”

Ha-ha, Sasuke thought, patently unamused.

Still… Natsuko had spoken well of him.

He had not expected it to matter, but it did.

x

Otogakure no Sato – the Village Hidden in Sound – was an actual village, rather than a full-blown city like Konoha. It hadn’t come as a surprise; it was a newly established village, in one of the ‘lesser’ countries, and it mostly consisted of formerly missing nin. It made sense that it wouldn’t have that many citizens, and consequently wouldn’t have been built too large (Iruka determinedly did not think about the war games that had reduced the initial number of nukenin applicants).

Iruka was still a little shocked by the final count. Circa thirty jounin and tokubetsu jounin, about the same number of chuunin, and less than a dozen gennin. None without a bloodline limit or a special skill. (Incidentally, the shinobi participating in the Chuunin Exams had been mostly jounin, with a couple of high chuunin interspersed.)

Those statistics made no sense. Or, well, they made no sense if he thought about them as a village. If he considered them to be a crazy S-class shinobi’s personal collection, the twisted logic behind the selection became apparent.

“They have no infrastructure whatsoever,” he concluded, horrified.

Was this how Tobirama-sama had felt, faced with the reality of establishing Konoha after the treaties were signed and Shodai-sama went off to build Mokuton buildings and play house with the Uzumaki princess?

“It’s still a very new village,” Godaime-sama pointed out.

Iruka gritted his teeth, fairly sure that she was doing this to goad him. “New? Maybe. But to qualify for the International Chuunin Examinations they would have had to prove at least five years of stable history of completing missions and be ratified by at least three major villages! How did they last six months without some kind of trade?!”

“They live off export,” Tsunade-sama replied tightly, narrowing her eyes at Iruka’s outburst. “Food, mainly.”

Iruka looked at her flatly. Yes, that had rather been the content of about a third of the negotiations, since Rice Fields had little more to offer, economically speaking. It was all civilian trade. The shinobi
just… *looted* whatever they needed? Within *their own* country?

“I’m busy!” snapped Hokage-sama. She stalked out of the office, passing her clone at the door. “You deal with this!”

“As you say,” the Kage Bunshin replied mildly. It waited for the slam of the door before it turned to Iruka and looked at him almost sympathetically. “Ah, sobriety – the curse that is never lifted for long.”

Iruka snorted before he could suppress the reaction. He felt himself blush, and focused on contracting his capillaries to their usual size. Hiding behind his paperwork did not really work. “Whereas you seem content enough.”

One of the clone’s shoulders lifted marginally, resulting in a disproportional amount of jiggling. “She left her sake stash unguarded.”

Iruka shook his head. It figured. He had thought Naruto’s Kage Bunshin were unusual in their unpredictability, but perhaps the jutsu truly was so perfect, and the caster was besieged by genuine doubles. Tobirama-sama had been an unparalleled genius.

As evidenced by him managing to make an actual ninja village somehow *work*.

“Help?” Iruka begged.

Hokage-sama’s clone sat opposite him, put its elbows onto the desk and read (upside-down) the paper in front of Iruka. In seconds. “Let’s start with essential resources, and see if we can optimise trade routes.”

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The Sannin left with nary a glance in Sasuke’s direction, while Natsuko was embraced around the waist and pulled close to the lecherous old man, who whispered in her ear.

Sasuke swallowed bile, trying not to imagine what might have been said in that short exchange.

Natsuko came back inside the bar room, appearing unruffled – but she always appeared unruffled. Sasuke searched for signs of discomfort, but she was too good an actor for him to find any. He finished distributing the ordered food to the respective tables, doing his best not to glare at those patrons who assumed that Jiraiya’s goodbye meant that Natsuko was an actual prostitute, and then pushed her out of the way to take over the washing of the dishes.

He barely recognised himself in that action. Still, he put his hands into the basin full of warm water and marveled at Natsuko’s unexpected pliancy. She usually would not have let him physically oust her out of anywhere. It was the boldest he had ever acted toward her and, frankly, he was stunned he still had all his extremities attached.

Natsuko removed her apron and hung it over the handle of a cabinet. When he checked at her out of the corner of his eye, she looked like she needed to sit down.

“Take a break,” he muttered. “I can do this.” And if not, he could always create a clone and henge it into her. Surely maintaining the illusion of Natsuko washing dishes for half an hour would not somehow compromise her cover?

She left, and that was about as clear an indication as he could get that she was feeling terrible. Probably been up all night – no, he was *not* going to think about that.
Sasuke was still determinedly working on *not* thinking about that when he entered their shared room a couple of hours later.

By the time he opened the door, Natsuko was already awake, although by her half-lying pose on her bed Sasuke assumed that she had been actually sleeping in the meantime. He felt mildly guilty for waking her.

“I can-”

“No,” he snapped. “I can manage on my own today. Just… sleep.” He looked away, uncomfortable. He was not used to expressing solicitousness, and wouldn’t know how to respond to having it acknowledged.

She hesitated, and then climbed to her feet instead of lying back down.

“Why do you put up with him?” he blurted, unable to stop himself. It was that ‘goodbye’ – he could not put it out of his mind no matter how hard he tried.

“Hm?” Natsuko blinked a couple of times, and pushed a strand of hair out of her face. “Oh, he is a great man. He has helped a lot-”

“That doesn’t mean he owns you,” Sasuke insisted. “He has enough money to buy a whore if he can’t keep it in his pants-”

Natsuko coughed, and then she coughed again and again, until the force of the fit sent her to her knees. She sank with a thump against the wooden floor, and Sasuke was so startled that he was too late reaching for her. He stabilized her against his chest as she quaked with the coughs. She finally calmed down – and he had the strangest urge to cradle her skull in his palm, perhaps even to stroke her hair to get her to relax.

He fancied he could feel life trickling out of her, day after day of suffering this illness. There was no guessing about that – he didn’t need to see her hands to know they would come away from her mouth stained with blood.

“I swear to you,” she said in a raspy whisper that he barely heard, since her cheek was resting on his shoulder, “I have never slept with Jiraiya.”

Sasuke thought she might have been trying not to cry – whether from pain, exhaustion or some other remembered violence committed on her. He tightened his hold on her shoulders and pressed his free hand to the spot between her wing-like shoulder blades.

He could have stayed like this for a long time. But he also couldn’t – so he helped her back to the bed and went downstairs to work.

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Team Kakashi didn’t so much catch up to the Sand shinobi, as they were awaited when they joined them in their camp. Not actually *invited*, but for two teams from countries verging on war everything went far too peacefully and non-stabbily.

Naruto left his huntmates to maintain the perimeter and followed on his three teammates’ heels, making it look like he was just the rookie hanger-on (which their instinctive dismissal of him confirmed to the three Sand nin).

“Baki-san, huh?” said Kakashi, ambling toward the campfire. His fingers formed a seal; he sent off a
clone to gather some more firewood.

“Kakashi-san,” replied the Suna jounin. He gestured furiously at the boy standing in the lengthening shadows behind him, and lightly touched the upper arm of the kunoichi next to him. “You’ve been persistent in following us, so I expect you have something important to say. Won’t you and your team take seats?”

“Thank you for your gracious invitation,” replied Kakashi-taichou, and somehow managed to make it sound like ‘quit while you’re ahead and I might decide to not disembowel you’.

Naruto palmed a couple shuriken in each hand, hunched his shoulders until he looked inattentive rather than loose and ready for combat (imitation was a valid form of learning, and Dog-sensei had always taught by example).

Kakashi did as bidden and took a seat. He refused to share food, and instead handed over one of the scrolls he had taken off of the messenger hawk. “Looks like your Jounin Commander is being especially unreasonable. Restoring honour to the Village Hidden in Sand, huh? Personally, I’m all about these new-fangled philosophies.”

Meaning, Naruto translated in his head, that Kakashi was laughing at any ninja that claimed to fight for honour. The mocking wasn’t quite honest, not even coming from Dog, but Hatake Kakashi’s reputation lent credence to it.

“The situation is… chaotic,” said the Sand jounin, sounding like it hurt him (but smelling like grilled bird meat, sesame oil and anxiety). “We do not have enough qualified personnel for every position that needs to be filled.”

That didn’t give away any information Konoha didn’t already know; no matter how hard the blonde kunoichi glared, Baki-san was not surrendering anything valuable in admitting weakness.

Too bad for him that Dog-taichou was smarter than to let arrogance goad him into revealing anything.

“So, do you guys have a new Kage yet?” taichou asked lightly.

All three Suna ninja tensed. After a while of silence, which senbon guy used to unseal a can of lychees, the foreign jounin said: “They’re trying to push it on me.”

“What a pain, huh,” Kakashi muttered mock-absently. If he felt sympathy – and he must have felt some – he didn’t show it.

Naruto crouched and let his eyes drift over the boy – Kan-something – and the hulking shape behind him that had to be the puppet. Or a puppet. Or even several puppets, packed up together for easier transportation.

“It’s not as easy as you imagine, tree-hugger!” hissed the blonde. “Our Father was murdered! And unlike you, we don’t just have a bunch of Kage-level shinobi hanging around getting drunk and waiting for their turn!”

“Temari!” snapped the jounin.

Naruto was tempted to suggest that Konoha could send someone to take over Suna if that was what Suna wanted. No problem.

Kakashi tilted his head to the side, mused for a moment and then, once the atmosphere grew thick
enough that people started reaching for weapons, laughed in her face.

Neener-neener.

The roof didn’t actually creak under the feet of a full-grown man; it was a shinobi clan house’s roof, so it remained silent and solid. But the tension in it still shifted, and Shikamaru could feel it through his entire back and arse and the soles of his feet – all the points of contact.

“Sulking?” inquired Shikamaru’s Dad in that ‘taking it easy on you’ voice that was designed to raise Shikamaru’s hackles.

Shikamaru wasn’t a small child. He wasn’t stupid, either. He didn’t need to be coddled.

Pipe down, he reminded himself, you like it when people take it easy on you. It’s what you want. He’s just manipulating you into acting competitive, of all things. What do you care for competition? Meh. Let some gung-ho idiot win them all.

“Rotten weather,” Shikamaru grumbled. And then secretly delighted in the face his Dad made.

_Busted._

“Eh, weather changes. One of the few things you can count on.”

Shikamaru almost smiled. Almost. He wouldn’t give his old man the satisfaction. Also, he hadn’t forgotten that his old man had come up here to talk to him, and his old man only went to that much effort if he had been _made to_. Hokage-sama had had a personal talk with Shikamaru, so it stood to reason that the Shadow Clan Head of the Shadow Clan was behind this ambush.

In other words, Shikamaru’s Mother was pissed at him – possibly even suspicious that he had sabotaged her mission, which Shikamaru had emphatically _not_ done.

“Anything you want to say to spare me the pain?” Shikaku inquired wryly, clearly already aware of what the answer was going to be.

Shikamaru shrugged one shoulder. “Just because she’s got your balls in her claws does not mean I’m neutered, too. Leave me alone, Dad. And if you want me to move out, just say the word.”

He doubted he could do anything short of kin-slaughter or blatant treason that would result in his Dad kicking him out; on the other hand, Shikamaru was proficient enough with the basic chores that he could competently take care of himself out of one of the chiunin flatlets. Less room to tidy up, too.

He wasn’t keen on using shared laundry facilities, though.

“You’re a worse headache than I was to my old man,” lamented Shikamaru’s Dad in that exaggerated voice he had copied from Inoichi-san.

More importantly, he did sit down, shut up, and resign himself to his wife’s displeasure.

The apartment door was wrenched open, and the woman standing there glared at whoever was bothering her.
“Ano… Tsubaki-san?” Sakura said uncertainly, trying very hard not to cringe or back away. “I… I wanted to ask… if you have a few minutes?”

Tsubaki-san reached up, pushed a strand of uncombed dark hair out of her face and continued glaring. “Why doesn’t anybody understand the damn concept of the damn night shifts-?!”

“Oh, I’m sorry!” That explained why she looked like she rolled out of bed at four in the afternoon. Sakura had waited until Kurenai-sensei had concluded their training to come; it hadn’t occurred to her that it might be an inconvenient time.

“What do you want, Pinky?”

*She wasn’t this much of a bitch last time,* Inner remarked.

Because I had not rudely woken her up, Sakura pointed out to herself. “I wanted to ask you for advice-”

“I’m the last person who should advise anyone on anything,” snapped Tsubaki-san. “Go to your sensei or your squad leader or whoever and leave me alone.” She moved to close the door.

It was inner Sakura that stuck her foot in it to prevent it from closing. Sakura herself seemed immediately appalled by what she had done, but at that point it was too late. She pressed one hand to the door, the other to the frame, and faced Tsubaki-san’s deathly glare head on.

“Please, wait! Just one question!” Quickly, because it seemed like Tsubaki-san was about to react to the home-invasion like any ninja would, Sakura blurted it out: “I want to learn healing, but I don’t know how to go about it! You’re a medic nin, Tsubaki-san. What should I do?”

The woman paused for a moment (the pressure on Sakura’s sandal eased a little). She closed her eyes and cursed filthily. “Go to the Hospital, find Akimichi Mio and beg. You’ve missed the intake by a month, so you’ll probably wash out anyway. Or you could do it like any other goddamn person and wait for the next semester. Now **goodbye.**”

The door slammed shut; Sakura managed to pull her foot back in the nick of time to avoid having her bones crushed.

Next time, she thought, I’ll remember to bring a bribe.

*Next time,* countered Inner as they walked away, you *could go the standard route from the start and not bug people for an apprenticeship. You’re not that special.*

The whole valley was a village.

Naruto kept his jaw tightly clenched to keep from staring open-mouthed. He still stared, but he couldn’t help it! It was a city! Built on both sides of the river, with a bunch of bridges connecting the shores with walkways and driveways for carts, and a whole lot of high-rise building! Way taller than in Konoha, even, ‘cause there was no space left to spread sideways, so the town could only grow upwards.

“Wooow,” he breathed, craning his neck, and ignored the Sand gennin that mocked him.

“We have reserved rooms at a ryokan,” said the Suna jounin, gesturing down a narrow, dark street that led toward the cliffside. “You’re welcome to join us, but they don’t allow pets.”
Kakashi changed directions to go the way Baki indicated.

Naruto belatedly realised that neither of Kakashi’s huntmates was in sight, and the jounin had been directing his significant looks at Naruto’s canine siblings.

So Naruto crouched down and whispered to Juuji: “I’ll summon you from inside the room.” Then he had to hurry to catch up to his teammates, while behind him Juuji and Annai grumbled stuff that Kana-san would have washed their maws for, and then unsummoned themselves.

“I have stayed here before,” Baki was saying, with the same fake politeness as Kakashi had used on him last night. “Their baths are passable, and the food is good. Staff leaves something to be desired, but they’re cheap enough that I don’t care. Would that be a problem for you, Hatake-san?”

“I deal with unpleasant people all the time,” Kakashi replied faux-absently, eyes trailing over the shop displays.

Naruto suppressed the urge to snigger, and focused on trying to believe his eyes. There was a whole city hidden inside a valley – just a few civilian’s days’ travel from Wakana-san’s home – but none of these people cared enough about some village high in the mountains. They were happy with their shops and their skyscrapers, and their river that served as a busy trade route.

Wakana-san was murdered practically round the corner, because her family could not get any sort of protection from foreign ninja.

And there were thousands of people here, who would never know.

That village did not matter at all, Naruto realised. If somebody wanted to start a war, they could have used it as a pretext, but the real concern was this place. It would have been so easy to attack. Naruto himself only had to look around for five minutes to find how he could have killed several hundreds of people without anybody even noticing he was there (one explosion, and those high-rises would topple like dominoes).

“Here we are,” Baki said redundantly, as the two teams approached a double door with a shining sign reading ‘Matsubara Ryoukan’. “Reconvene in an hour?”

“Half an hour,” Dog-taichou countered, signing something at senbon guy.

Naruto watched the resulting argument within the Suna team, and then followed as Kakashi checked them all in, negotiating for two double rooms when the guy at reception refused to let them have one room and sleep on their bedrolls.

Of course Kakashi would not let them enjoy the baths. Naruto barely had the time to shower and change before they were expected in the dining hall – which was kind of a generous description, but the place still seemed surreal to Naruto after the past few weeks of camping in woods. He hadn’t expected that preventing war would include places like this.

He didn’t have time to think about it much, though, because Baki and Kankuro (without his face-paint Naruto only recognised him by smell) appeared right on time, with Temari trailing behind them with wet hair sticking to her head and slowly soaking the back of her kimono.

The six of them sat in uncomfortable silence, waiting for Kakashi.

Predictably.

Baki ordered drinks and food for his team, but both senbon guy and Nishi-sensei waved the waitress
away every time she came by. Naruto’s stomach growled.

This was stupid. He would bet Kakashi was hiding just outside the window, or inside the ceiling, and having a great laugh at them.

It wasn’t like they couldn’t function without their commander, was it?

So the third time the waitress came by, scowling with annoyance, he yelled over senbon guy’s dismissal: “A pot of green tea and four cups, please! Have you got ramen? Great, I’ll have miso. Four bowls.” He knew it wouldn’t be too good, but even if they served him instant ramen it was better than no ramen at all.

He was hungry.

“Nishi-sensei?”

Senbon guy tried to protest, but Nishi-sensei decided to take advantage of Naruto’s initiative and placed his own order.

Senbon guy looked like he wanted to be stubborn, but hunger won over there, too. Sadly, Naruto was sure that the man already planned how to use Naruto as a meat shield against Kakashi once the time for justifications came.

Sure enough, Kakashi appeared at the same time as their food did (the whole Suna team had already finished eating, and sat over their empty dishes with identical annoyed expressions). “Are you usurping me again, chuunin-kun?”

Naruto rolled his eyes, pushed one of his four bowls of ramen toward his team lead and deadpanned: “Itadakimasu.”

“They made you a chuunin?” exclaimed Kankuro, before turning to Kakashi. “Him?!”

“You think you deserved a promotion?” Naruto snapped back. Maybe he was usurping Kakashi, but he only kept doing it because Kakashi kept setting him up for it. “No real shinobi would punch and choke a little kid who accidentally bumped into him in the street. And apologised.” Naruto sneered at the Suna nin’s suddenly panicky expression. “Yeah, cat-butt-face, Kono told me what happened. And he told me your sister just stood by and watched. Do you often beat on kids to feel like a strong ninja?”

“Shit,” muttered Temari.

Her brother swallowed. “Temari-”

“Don’t. He’s got a point.”

“Oh, does he?” Baki pressed through his teeth, glaring at his two students. “We’ll be talking about this. Later.”

Silence fell over the table. Kankuro poked at his empty plate with his chopsticks; Temari crossed her arms in front of her chest and glared at the opposite wall. Kakashi had somehow used the confrontation as cover for eating, and now eye-smiled over his cleaned-out bowl, like he was happy that Naruto managed to antagonise the Sand shinobi almost as well as Kakashi had been doing it himself for the past twenty-four hours.

“I’ve heard what you’ve done in that village up North,” Baki said after a while, almost like he had
read Naruto’s mind earlier.

Senbon guy focused on eating his food very slowly and seemed not to notice anything happening around him, but Nishi-sensei flinched a little.

“Problem?” inquired taichou.

“Working *pro bono publico*? You’re adding insult *and* injury on top of the already sustained injuries.”

Meaning, Naruto tentatively decided, that if Konoha continued solving problems without asking for any money in *recompense*, nobody would buy any missions from Suna and their economy would sink even further down the drain.

Huh. Naruto hadn’t thought of it like that. It had felt good to help those poor people, but maybe in helping them without asking for any of their money they were dooming them to be yet poorer in the future? Grrr! This was too complicated!

“Well, I wouldn’t have bothered,” Kakashi assured him with a one-shoulder shrug, “if not for those Sound shinobi killing people. I know, you and Sound, it’s complicated… but I thought after Orochimaru killed Rasa, you were off-again?”

Wow. Kakashi sure could talk in whole sentences when it meant antagonising people.

Baki’s face flushed. Temari leapt to her feet, reflexively reaching for her fan – which she had left in her room upstairs – and Kankuro took a deep breath to start yelling, but Baki shut them both down with a blast of killing intent.

“Hatake-san,” said the Suna jounin in a tone that was half formal and half long-suffering, “you’re aware that you were trespassing upon sovereign territory of the Land of Wind—”

“Actually,” senbon guy spoke, finally glancing up from his dinner, “you’ll find that we’re not. The last Wind-Fire peace treaty has specified the Nogiwa river as the border between Wind and Rivers, so we were a good five kilometers within the Land of Rivers. As the crow flies, even.”

Kakashi tilted his head to the side; his one, dark eye looked at the Sand team from the shadow of his hitai-ate. “You want to sit down in private and discuss this like proper ambassadors?”

Baki’s honest response was written in the lines around his eyes, and it was negative with a flavour of vile cursing, but he still stood up, inclined his head and gestured toward the corridor.

Asuka put Sasuke through hours of hell she called training in retaliation for him not summoning her in over a month, and then proceeded to stalk Natsuko for the whole day.

“This is a much better female,” she announced eventually, while Sasuke struggled with wrapping his sprained wrist. “She knows her worth. She lets you come to her and follow her around, and prove that you have the stamina she needs in a mate.”

Sasuke sputtered. His face felt like it was on fire.

Asuka clapped with her bill, twice, to emphasise her decision. “I approve of her.”

The ‘shut up!’ was on the tip of Sasuke’s tongue, but he had learnt the hard way why nobody said
that to Asuka. She taught this lesson with pain, and it had stuck.

Instead, he crossed his arms in front of his chest and pretended that he hadn’t noticed his near-terminal blush. “We’ve had this conversation. I’m too young for that sort of thing.” And there were many other reasons. Sasuke didn’t feel that way about his colleague. The age difference was too big. Natsuko wouldn’t be interested in him that way even if Sasuke were older. There was that Kisame person. And Natsuko was very sick. Besides, while that man lived there was no point in raising the topic even hypothetically.

Those were all true and valid arguments, but Sasuke felt that offering them all at the same time would turn them into so much meaningless sound, and let Asuka counter-attack with a clichéd ‘Aren’t you protesting too much? Ha-ha-ha!’ the way people tended to whenever Sasuke said he did not like a particular girl. Which used to be often, before he realised there was no point in complaining.

“There’s plenty of other fish in the river,” Asuka muttered, conceding the argument.

Sasuke looked over to the treeline, beyond which Natsuko was doing her kata with no regard for her failing body. “Why is this so important to you anyway?”

“You keep insisting on trying to get yourself killed. And if you do, what will happen with the contract? I want future summoners out of you.”

Sasuke shuddered.

He might have stated reviving his clan as one of his goals, but the practical part of it seemed completely disgusting to him. Perhaps he and that man would kill one another, and the point would become moot?

He could only hope.
The Line in the Sand

Sasuke could not stop scowling. His wrist had healed, but his forearms were a mass of cuts, so he was forced to wash bandages daily, as if he didn’t have enough other work. And he did not begrudge Natsuko the times when she left him alone with it to go out for some intelligence work, or to recuperate, but he couldn’t understand why she was making it worse for herself.

Was this fatalism? Did she want to speed up her death?

“Why do you smoke so much if you’re so sick?” he snapped, once the pressure inside his chest rose too high and he had to say something.

Natsuko waved her hand, in which she had held a cigarette just a moment ago. “I don’t smoke, Tomio-kun. Smoking would kill me.” The corner of her mouth rose, as if the topic of her death was somehow funny. “Faster.”

Sasuke glared at her. “I see you smoke all the time.”

The mouth-corner remained tilted up. “I am very good at that trick. But it is all a genjutsu – even breathing in smoke might affect my lungs too badly.”

She shouldn’t be telling him this, Sasuke thought. If she was so susceptible it could be used as a weapon against her.

Why did she trust him?

Or was it that she had to? Did she expect to be ambushed with smoke, and was this her warning Sasuke that he couldn’t count on her help if that happened?

“How?” he demanded, staring at her as she ‘smoked’. There was the practiced look of it – the absent-minded motions, her mouth puckering around the end of the cigarette, and then the complicated swirls of smoke, and on top of that the distinctive smell. How could she keep all of that up, and why would she?

That was so much work for no discernible effect at all!

“Very well,” she said calmly, amused by all the emotion Sasuke was freely displaying. “Watch my hands, Tomio-kun.” Her fingers, pale and thin but steady, folded into the first seal. Then she paused and gave him a narrow-eyed look. “No doujutsu cheating. Try to see if you can figure this out without the Sharingan.”

Kakashi tried to ambush them just before dawn, but Juuji woke Naruto up before he was skewered. Naruto hopped out of the way of the assault and sniffed.

Dog-taichou smelled like Dog-taichou, except sort of acrid-sweaty, like he used to smell during some of his ANBU shifts. It was the on-his-second-soldier-pill stink.

He opened his palm, then clenched a fist, and pointed two fingers vaguely Northwards.

Five minutes later the whole team was assembled on the outer side of the hotel wall.

“Nishi-sensei?” Naruto inquired as they set out across the town (all the streets were dark and lit with
streetlamps, but they probably needed artificial lights even in the middle of the day, ‘cause sun never could have gotten down here). “How many soldier pills can you take before you overdose?”

The medic glanced in Kakashi’s direction for a split second before he answered. “You’d have to take more than you physically can for serious toxication. I’d worry first about dehydration, then hallucinations, and then narcolepsy. And even then most of the problems stem from lack of sleep rather than the chemicals.”

Naruto yawned just thinking about not sleeping for so long. Their team lead was a crazy person – not that that was actual news – and he was harder on himself than on any of his subordinates, which wasn’t actually satisfying to realise.

“I bet you Temari and Kankuro get to sleep in, because their jounin-sensei spent the night conferencing with Kakashi-taichou and needs to sleep for, like, three days straight.” If he was not currently in the baths attempting to drown himself in despair.

Naruto wished he were in the baths right now. Another side-effect of the mountains and the skyscrapers and lack of sun was that River City was super cold.

“I didn’t like the way they smelled,” muttered Juuji.

“All sad and angry,” agreed Annai.

“They had a third team member in the exams,” pointed out senbon guy. “And they’re the former Kage’s children, aren’t they? So where’s their brother?”

Kakashi stopped at the foot of the cliffside. He eyed the vertical rock, the narrow, winding staircase hewn into it, and then nonchalantly led the way to the public elevator. He glanced at Naruto in the reflection of the glass the cabin-wall was made of. “Where do you think he is?”

Naruto had thought about it, of course, but he did not like any of the options. “My first guess was hiding in the forest and waiting to ambush us. But if he was, you wouldn’t be asking like that.” And he wouldn’t smell nearly as smug.

Kakashi-taichou knew exactly where the third Sand sibling was. And he was happy about it. So, probably under Konoha’s control? In Konoha? Was that why Temari and Kankuro looked so hateful?

Well, if they had problems with getting defeated, they shouldn’t have started a stupid invasion-tebayo!

“Ah,” senbon guy said, all satisfied, and turned away to look through the glass as the elevator cabin began to rise.

Naruto suppressed a growl. If senbon guy figured it out, it couldn’t be so hard. So, the missing Sand brother was a jinchuuriki. This wasn’t a secret, what with the way Suna had brought him to Konoha to use him as a weapon in the invasion. That didn’t happen, because after catching Orochimaru there was a thorough investigation that revealed the entire huge plot, got Sand and Sound contestants disqualified and ended in those awkward Konoha-only finals (but Naruto was a real chunin, no matter what anybody said).

Iruka-sensei had been working very hard on the diplomatic thing where the Land of Fire took over the whole Land of Rice Fields. It boggled Naruto’s mind – there had been a lot of conferencing with some stuffy types from the Fire Daimyo’s court, and everybody was really respectful of Iruka-sensei, even though he wore the not-ANBU armour instead of the ceremonial dress.
The Land of Rice Fields didn’t seem happy, but they mostly went along with it, ‘cause they had lost their Kage, and a bunch of their elite people had been detained, and there wasn’t much administration left in the village of Sound to organise a worthwhile war effort. The only thing they could have managed if they had fought was dying for nothing.

So they surrendered.

Naruto got a bit distracted by the River City form this height. The skyscrapers started ending, one by one, and the dawn light hit the others; a lot of glass reflected the glare, and it hurt the eyes to look, but he also couldn’t stop looking.

Nishi-sensei sighed quietly, entranced. Kakashi and senbon guy were, naturally, totally cool and uninterested, as if they had seen similar things a million times before.

Naruto crouched down to share the wonder with Juuji and Annai, fingers tangled in their ruffs, and went back to his train of thought. So, Sound surrendered, but.

It was different with the Land of Wind, though maybe not that much different? For one thing, the Land of Wind had a Daimyo (like Fire but unlike Rice Fields). But Suna was also without a Kage (like Rice Fields) ‘cause Orochimaru killed the old one. And, before Orochimaru did that, the old Kazekage had killed a lot of Sand’s strongest shinobi.

“We don’t actually want anything from either Sand or Wind, right?” Naruto asked, trying to look at the whole mess like a Hokage would.

Kakashi waited, watching him with his dark, barely blinking eye from the shadow under his slanted hitai-ate.

Naruto took that as encouragement. “Wind’s got a lot of land, but it’s all poor. Bad. What’s the word… arable. It’s not that. So, if we took over, it’d just be a drain on our resources.”

Silence.

“But so’d be a war. And Suna knows they can’t win against us, but they’re desperate, so they might still try.”

Silence.

But Suna wasn’t trying. They were negotiating, even though they had less than nothing to negotiate with. Less than nothing. They were bluffing, and they were hoping that Konoha would lose interest in them and just leave them be…

The elevator ground to a halt and they disembarked. Naruto took one last look at the shiny, sleepy city below them – only the highest tower stuck up a little further up from where they stood.

…because they had nothing. No money, not enough people, barely enough food and weapons.

“We took their weapons,” Naruto pointed out.

Konoha hadn’t kept the people who were going to be a part of the invasion, but they didn’t release anybody armed. Then what if somebody was a weapon?

“We took all their weapons,” Naruto repeated, “including Temari and Kankuro’s brother.”

Kakashi finally nodded.

“Hostages lose their worth when they die, Naruto-kun,” pointed out Nishi-sensei.

Naruto wasn’t reassured. He continued staring at Kakashi – at the then-Hokage who had had to take over for the Old Man, fight a small war with Oto and prevent a bigger war with Suna, all on the same day. “Is he a hostage, though? Or is he just spoils?”

Dog-taichou had always treated Naruto like a person, but he had been Naruto’s Dad’s student, so that was personal. And Naruto knew that most people wouldn’t treat a jinchuuriki like a person.

“What…” replied Kakashi, leaving it at that.

x

Shizune hadn’t noticed when the boy woke. At one point she just looked over to the bed, and he was watching her with wide, frightened eyes.

She smiled as best as she could. She wasn’t really good with children. “Hello, Gaara-kun.”

He didn’t reply. For a while he didn’t move at all. Then he blinked. And then he continued staring.

Shizune sighed. Case in point. They should have assigned someone here who knew how to talk to kids. Although, to be fair, this boy wasn’t a normal kid even by ninja standards.

“My name is Shizune,” she said. “I am a medic.”

Still, there wasn’t any reaction from the bed.

“You are in Konohagakure no Sato, Gaara-kun, but no one will hurt you. You possess no information we need, so there will be no interrogation either.” Shizune wanted to cringe. That didn’t sound at all reassuring. Still, if the boy was smart, and she guessed he had to be to survive this long despite the terrible things that had been done to him, he would be reassured. “Uhm… I guess the closest thing to your position would be a political hostage.”

This time there was a slight reaction. The boy looked away from her and seemed to be examining his hands. They were very slight, soft and pale, Shizune thought. Not at all like a shinobi’s hands, which were usually callused and strong.

The boy muttered something.

Shizune couldn’t understand. “Sorry, what was that?”

Eyes still trained on his fingers, the boy repeated, louder: “Mother!”

And then he started screaming.

x

Sasuke had lived with sexual harassment for longer than two years. He had not known it at the time – he had only realised it in hindsight, with outside help – but the feelings of discomfort, distrust and (if he were pressed to admit it) fear were familiar. He would not forget the ingrained response any time soon.

So when he saw the man’s hand fall on Natsuko’s backside, hard enough to rattle her frame, he shattered the glass he was washing.
Natsuko cast a warning look in his direction and went about her duties over the course of the evening rush – but now Sasuke paid her more attention and saw that despite the precautions she took, that man’s hand managed to land on her flesh twice more, and once she barely snuck out of his attempt to reach up her skirt.

At some point Natsuko came to the kitchen and ordered Sasuke out of the building, because he could not keep a lid on his killing intent.

Fine, he thought. Fine. Whatever. He lurked outside. And planned. And waited for that man to come out, stagger far enough away from the inn for plausible deniability – and then gave him what he had so clearly been asking for.

“Did you eviscerate someone?” Natsuko asked when Sasuke came to their shared room, some time after midnight.

Sasuke cast about for an answer that would be both honest and correct, and came up with: “Only a little.”

“Go to bed,” she snapped, rising to her feet. “You have to work early tomorrow.”

“What? But I was supposed to have a day off-”

“Because it is my shift, but I am going to spend the night attempting to minimise the damage wrought by your puerility, Tomio-kun.” A cough wracked her; she pressed a palm to the doorframe to hold herself upright.

She shouldn’t go out like that. Not for some lowlife degenerate that had already assaulted her – not in her condition. “Wait-”

“Let me go, Tomio-kun,” she snapped, and Sasuke did so, fingers releasing the fabric of her sleeve before he even realised he was obeying.

Never before had she looked at him so coldly.

“I have a night’s work ahead of me,” she said, and knelt to recover supplies from the cache under the floorboards. “And you should sleep, so you can work hard tomorrow and think about what we are doing here. This is your mission, shinobi, and if you abandon the objective for your own injured pride, you have no business wearing a hitai-ate.”

She was gone out the door before Sasuke could explain. He had known that he was compromising their cover, of course he had, but that person had assaulted Natsuko. And it was Sasuke’s objective to protect her, wasn’t it?

That was what Kakashi had meant with his ‘worse than trash’ talk, wasn’t it?

Or had Sasuke been right from the start, and was every ninja just making it up as they went along until someone cut them down? If that was the life lesson he was supposed to learn in this place, then perhaps Jiraiya had done him a service after all.

x

How did they know about his hearing? Iruka couldn’t get it out of his head. How could they know?

He had never told anybody. He was certain that Kakashi had inferred it at some point – it was Kakashi – and he had given Naruto a hint about as broad as the Fire Country, but that wasn’t enough
to figure out anything. Not even in conjunction with anything he had done.

It didn’t make sense.

Iruka blinked. No, it didn’t make sense. Unless someone else who knew had told someone outside of Iruka’s sphere of influence. He would stake his life on the fact that it wasn’t Kakashi, but his parents would not have been quite as paranoid, would they?

And Iruka had recently made an enemy of his parents’ acquaintance, hadn’t he?

“While I’m in the meeting,” he said to Boar, who was presently shadowing him, “look into Watanabe Omura. He might be holding a grudge.” He would compose a list of other people that might have liked to get rid of him. And then reference Kakashi’s list – which must have existed, of course, although ordinarily Iruka wouldn’t have the clearance to know about it, much less read it.

That was one perk of technically retaining his position as Hokage’s aide this long.

“Yes, Umino-sama,” said the ANBU, and by now Iruka didn’t even flinch at the form of address anymore.

It wasn’t nearly as uncomfortable as the knowledge that he might have just destroyed an innocent man’s life because of an unfortunate coincidence.

x

“Let’s start with a thousand one-handed push-ups, Lee!”

“Yosh, Gai-sensei! And if I can’t, I shall run a hundred laps on my hands!”

Neji finished the fourth kata and moved into the initial stance for the next one. At this early stage, fluidity was more important than speed. He estimated that he might complete this technique within two weeks.

“Tenten?” asked an unfamiliar voice.

A tokubetsu jounin approached them, giving the two green beasts a wide berth. Neji recognised him as one of the Chuunin Exams proctors, although he had not been aware of any connection between him and Neji’s teammate.

“Hayate-sensei!” Tenten called out cheerfully. “How was your mission? Are you fine to train today?”

The tokujou waved his hand dismissively and smiled.

Tenten packed up her weapons in a whirlwind, yelled: “I’m going to train with Hayate-sensei, Gai-sensei!” and walked off in step with the former proctor.

Neji finished the fifth kata, but did not move onto the sixth one. He considered his situation, and Tenten’s. Then he decided that he might as well seek out his own instructor.

Anko-sensei was busy, but her shadow clone was lounging on the terrace in front of her apartment, apparently waiting for someone (it did not share any details). Neji was ordered to sit, provided with lukewarm tea and a set of senbon to practice chakra control tricks.

“I thought you were busy,” said the clone while Neji balanced ten senbon, one on each fingertip.
Neji shrugged, and managed not to dislodge any of the needles. “Gai-sensei and Lee were busy. Tenten walked away from team training for her private tutoring, so I did not see any reason to linger.”

“I think your team needs to switch the sensei with one of the rookie teams,” grumbled Anko-sensei’s clone. “I’d prefer Kakashi for it, meh, but Asuma or Kurenai-chan would do in a pinch. ‘cause, let me tell you, even temporary international co-op squads have better teamwork than you.”

“I understand why they would not want to work with me,” Neji admitted. Even aside from the damage he had inflicted upon Hinata-sama, he must have been singularly unpleasant to work with in the past.

Every time either Gai-sensei or Lee repeated how ‘a genius of hard work surpassed a natural genius’, Neji’s resentment grew a little. He was the lesser Clan member, the lesser team member, the lesser shinobi. Just lesser. It was not until Naruto-san looked at him, saw someone worthwhile and gave him straightforward advice on how to better himself, that Neji understood what it meant to feel human.

Apologising to Hinata-sama had been painful, but also freeing. Neji had thought about apologising to his teammates as well, but could not quite find it in himself. And it felt like it was too late now, anyway.

Anko-sensei shrugged. “Yeah, well. Do better from now on.”

Neji nodded. This was the kind of advice he could accept.

One thing you could say about Shikamaru as a roommate was that he was quiet. Granted, he spent most of his free time asleep, and he didn’t snore, so quietness was the direct consequence of his prevalent character trait – laziness.

Still, after two weeks of sleeping on his bedroom floor, the liminal sound of his breathing annoyed Ino to distraction.

“I should just get my own place,” she grumbled. Sure, as Shikamaru had warned her, she’d have to do her own laundry, but that didn’t seem like such a steep price.

“Yes, you should,” replied Shikamaru. Apparently, he wasn’t asleep. The lazy faker. “Why don’t you.”

“Because…” Ino paused at the sudden dearth of reasons occurring to her. “Oh.”

“You’re nominally adult,” Shikamaru pointed out.

Right. Ino had a hitai-ate, which gave her the right to make her own decisions. Their parents had made every effort to downplay this aspect of Team Ten’s ninja careers, and for the most part they succeeded.

Why hadn’t Ino realised this when her Dad didn’t appear at the Nara Clan house to drag her home?

“Not used to it…?” she guessed. “But that is a fantastic idea. See, I can have good ideas, too.”

“Occasionally. And even then you need me to point them out to you-“
“Shut up. If you didn’t abandon us—”

“Stop complaining and catch up.” Shikamaru grabbed his pillow and dragged it over his face, either to block out her voice or to attempt to kill himself.

“If they gave us Sakura, we could have tried in these Exams. But, nooo, we—” Got Sasuke, and Ino had promptly fucked him up badly enough that he ran away. “-have to wait for some other kid, that will probably be a total rookie—”

“Why didn’t you talk to Sakura, ambush Asuma together and badger him into signing you up?” Shikamaru complained, pulling the pillow away so he could glare at her (with only one eye, since opening them both would apparently be way too much effort). “Honestly, Ino, for someone that wants to be the leader of her generation, you’re not very proactive.”

Ino hated it when Shikamaru gave honest criticism, because he would invariably turn out to be right. On the other hand, it was a rare occasion when he did bother, so she swallowed her reflexive response and focused on figuring out how best to apply his advice. It was always worth it.

“I apologise,” Sasuke said after Tsujimoto-san sent him off and went to lock up, and Sasuke was finally – finally – allowed to shut the door between himself and the insipid mass of humanity outside.

Natsuko rubbed sleep out of her eyes – that should not have been a gesture inspiring tenderness in any shape or form – and looked at him with incredulity he had not deserved. He was perfectly capable of apologising. And willing, if the apology was warranted. It did not happen often, but an apology absolutely was within his skill set.

“I wished to defend you and disregarded the fact that you are capable of defending yourself,” he explained reluctantly.

Natsuko stared at him. Were she anyone else, Sasuke would have called it goggling, but, of course, she was far more self-contained than that.

Having exhausted the supply of topics he wished to address, Sasuke tacitly placed the tray with a spread of bread and condiments and a pot of tea onto the bed, next to her.

Natsuko nodded. “I am glad you have thought about it. I hope this will prevent you from making the same mistake again.”

Sasuke nodded back.

“Luckily, your victim was not dead yet. Even with my meagre healing skill I managed to mitigate the damage. I arranged the scene to make it appear as though he had tripped and fallen into the ditch, causing himself harm on the rubbish discarded there. And I forced enough alcohol down his throat that even if he does survive and remembers anything, everyone would dismiss it as a hallucination.”

Sasuke nodded again.

Natsuko might have been angry with him, but she was still using this as a teachable moment. He was glad for her instruction – and for the first time somewhat ashamed of having disappointed his teacher. None of the Academy teachers had ever inspired anything similar in him, and the less said about Kakashi (who had been far more invested in playing the clown than in teaching) the better.
Gai could be a lot politer than most people expected, although Anko was pretty sure that in Gai politeness basically amounted to passive aggressiveness. That was how it worked for her.

Good thing that she didn’t intimidate easily.

Besides, she had kicked Gai’s arse a couple of times in ANBU training. No, the truly terrible thing about Gai was that he exuded sincerity to the point that it made you feel like you were kicking puppies and drowning kittens whenever he made you aware that you disappointed his expectations of you.

Anko had a reason why she did not spend any time around the man outside of black ops.

She gestured toward the opposite seat, tacitly inviting him to join her for a meal.

“Thank you, but I shan’t bother you longer than necessary.”

Anko popped a piece of sushi into her mouth – regretfully, even an awesome kunoichi like her could not subsist solely on dango – and leaned back, giving Gai a significant portion of her attention.

“With all Due Respect to your Multiple Qualities as an Excellent Kunoichi, Anko-san, I would Prefer if in the future you did not interfere with how I choose to teach my Students.” He was really polite. In between the uncharacteristic calm and the overly proper wording, it was clear that Gai was pissed.

Well, fine. Anko got pissed right back. “So you do actually teach them? ‘cause, let me tell you, I wondered.”

A thundercloud settled over his face. There was no killing intent coming from him but all that bunching and coiled tension sent alerts to any half-conscious ninja around. A few people on the sidelines actually moved further away from him.

Anko just blinked slowly. It was the smart-people version of giving him a bird.

“I Know them Well,” Gai spoke in a carefully measured tone, “and I am Very Conscious of their Progress. All three of them are already Remarkable Shinobi, and I am Certain they will grow into Admirable People.”

“So it is your strategy,” said Anko. She was disappointed. Goddamnit, this was why she tried not to respect people. They invariably disappointed her.

“Indeed. I am Aware that there are many things for which Neji is not ready yet-”

“Like anything at all that he doesn’t figure out himself. Yeah, so I’ve been told. Fuck, Uchiha was fucking right. It is strategy. You were sabotaging him. You got one genius to sabotage, Kakashi got the other. Whoa.” Fuck. Why did he have to confront her in public? She hated making public scenes.

No, she did not. But she only liked making public scenes when they were calculated and had the exact effect that she set out to achieve.

She did not want to argue with Gai about what a sensei meant to their gennin students, and how Gai must have been spoiled by having an awesome one. How it could fuck you up for life if you weren’t that lucky.

“I get it.” She said more quietly, glaring at their audience and releasing a blast of killing intent that assured them privacy from anyone but the most hardened jounin (and which was also going to result
in her being asked to leave the restaurant and not come back). “Who in their right mind would trust one of those kids? So full of hatred, both of them.” Don’t think of sensei, she reminded herself, pinching her thigh viciously. “Where the fuck do they get off acting like that? It’s not like they were oppressed and marginalised or had their whole family murdered… oh, whoops.” She theatrically threw both hands in the air and blinked away the tears.

The fuck did she have to cry about? It wasn’t like she had believed that teaching that one cool kid that respected and sorta liked her could turn into something good. Next thing she would con herself into thinking she could teach snot-nosed pipsqueaks at the Academy without ending on the wrong side of a lynch mob.

Gai was staring at her. There was less bunching and tension now and, oh goody, now it was apparently time for pity. “Anko-san… I am Aware that there are Painful Experiences in your Past, and I Regret that there was no one there on whom you could have leaned-”

“I muddled through,” she cut him off. “Kakashi helped. Which makes this whole thing a thousand times worse-”

“You are Mistaken,” Gai cut her off in turn. The lack of politeness meant that he had worked through his anger – and there was no property damage involved. ‘cause he could be a mature individual like that. “Neji has made it Clear from the start that my interference in his technical training was Unwelcome. I understood. I can help him little with his Clan taijutsu, and although I know Many Styles that he could benefit from, he refused to taint his form. Insistence on my part had turned out… Unwise.”

“Oh.” Yeah, Anko could see that. Her kid was screwed up. There was a reason why they got along so well. “But there’s so much more he could have been shown by now. I know you love it, but taijutsu is not everything.”

“The Neji you have come to know is quite new, Anko-san. His experience at the Chuunin Examinations has changed him greatly.” Gai folded himself into a chair – not the one Anko had indicated earlier, but the one next to hers. Their knees bumped together. “I may be guilty of not reacting to that change faster, and for Pointing that out to me I am Grateful to you.”

“Yeah. Okay.” Anko was too baffled to formulate a more intelligent response. “I didn’t teach him that much. Just body-flicker and a little bit with senbon.”

“And poison,” pointed out the Beautiful Green Beast of Konoha, raising his voluminous eyebrows. Anko shrugged. “It’s not proper senbon if there’s no poison.”

Gai solemnly inclined his head and tried to put a patronising hand on her shoulder, which she dodged on reflex. “Thank you for your Diligent Care, Anko-san – it does you Proud. But trust me to take over for now.”

“Are you sure I can’t… never mind.” She stuffed another piece of sushi into her mouth and concentrated on chewing. Was she completely braindead? Why on Earth would she have let herself entertain a goddamn hope? Like she hadn’t burnt herself on that fire enough!

“I did not mean to Offend you,” Gai said, bemused.

Yeah right. If he hadn’t wanted to offend her, he would not have been polite to her.

“’m not offended, Gai. I was just kinda… you know.” She waved her hand in a gesture that meant exactly nothing. “Enjoying it.”
“Oh!” There was a moment of silence from that side (which the owner took to mean that it was safe
to come and kick out the ninja that interfered with her business). “Well, in that case, I will be Happy
to Consult Neji’s further Training with you and Discuss an Arrangement!”

Anko almost gave herself whiplash turning her head to stare at him.

What?

But he didn’t notice, too busy bowling over the angry restaurant owner with his typical exuberance,
until the confused and scared woman went away – without banning Anko.

What-?
“Ow!”

“…Nishi?” senbon guy asked of the tree line a prolonged moment later.

“I’m fine,” the tree line replied, sounding kind of like it was gritting its teeth. “I just got head-butted by a goat.”

Senbon guy sucked in his lower lip and bit down so hard that his senbon made an indent in it.

“Maa, Naruto…” muttered Kakashi-taichou, “going to the bushes should be a private ti-”

“Next time I’ll let him trip over the pit viper,” grumbled Naruto, put out that Nishi-sensei had stabbed his clone, who had valiantly saved his life. Or at the very least saved him a nasty bite and a very, very bad day. Venomous snake bites were not fun even when you had a demon in your belly; they had to be way worse for other people.

“Ah,” said senbon guy, now far less amused.

Kakashi briefly glanced over the top of his book.

He let out a flash of killing intent.

The forest suddenly exploded with noise. Birds took flight, rodents ran for their lives, somewhere a little further off a bear roared in response, but didn’t take the challenge. Snakes, lizards and insects went quietly, but undoubtedly went, instinctively aware that facing Dog was suicide.

Beyond the tree line there was the distinct sound of someone falling on their arse, and Naruto hoped that Nishi-sensei had had a chance to step clear. He might have been a little annoyed at the iryounin, but he didn’t want to have to smell the aftermath for the next few days.

“What was that for?” complained the tree line.

Half a minute later Nishi-sensei was back, scowling and a little flushed, but uncontaminated by any stinks that would make Naruto regret trying to help.

“Did I mention I want to go home?” Nishi-sensei asked, formulating it like a joke, but not really hiding how much he meant it.

By now both Kakashi and senbon guy must have also noticed that Nishi-sensei was a bit like Sakura about camping out for a long time, except that Sakura had the excuse of being a girl who had been sleeping in her parents’ house for her whole life, barring a couple of overnight training trips. Nishi-sensei was about forty, and unless he had one of those sicknesses that made him achy if he didn’t sleep in bed – which he didn’t, because Naruto would have smelled it – he had nothing to complain about.

“What I’d like to know,” Nishi-sensei said after he made a circuit of the brook and came back with his hands washed, “is how that shadow clone survived getting flung into a tree.”

Kakashi’s book went down, and his eyebrow up. Senbon guy paused in sucking on his senbon.
All three men turned to Naruto.

Naruto shrugged. “The trees around here are soft?”

He definitely was not going to tell them that he had met one of Jiraiya’s super-undercover operatives, and that Natsuko-san had felt bad about sort-of ‘stealing’ the Oiroke, and illicitly gave Naruto the seal Jiraiya designed for her so she could use shadow clones long-term without supervising them. Nope. He was also absolutely not mentioning that he had found out you could paint the seal onto the wild goat’s furry side, and it made the Kage Bunshin that much sturdier. Nuh-uh.

Kakashi’s eyebrow went down and his book up.

Senbon guy huffed and returned to staring upwards at the sky (was he cloud-watching? he did have a bit of a Shikamaru-like vibe to him).

Nishi-sensei kept scowling, but let it go. “Next time please warn me ahead of time if there are any venomous snakes in the area.”

“Your friend?” Natsuko inquired matter-of-factly when Sasuke turned up to their joint training accompanied by a pelican.

“Asuka,” said Sasuke. He did not think any further explanations were necessary.

Natsuko nodded in greeting, and continued coiling her ninja wire using only chakra strings. She remained entirely unsurprised.

Sasuke suspected that she had been more aware of Asuka’s stalking than she had let on.

“Spar with me,” Asuka demanded.

Sasuke nodded and reached for his kunai – but Asuka was looking at Natsuko.

“Perhaps at another time, Asuka-san,” Natsuko replied calmly, but very definitively. Sasuke would have backed down at that tone, respecting her decision in deference to her health and other obligations. She did not have to explain whether she was feeling unwell, or if there was a task she would have to attend to in a short time; Sasuke trusted her enough to accept her choice.

Asuka, naturally, did not. “Come on, wormfood,” she insisted. “Just a little spar.”

“No, Asuka-san,” Natsuko said, a little chilly now. She met Asuka’s eye and held it.

Sasuke did not like where this was going. What if his summon irritated his teacher into washing her hands off him? “Asuka-

“Shut up, egg-yolk. I’m going to have a little one-on-one with your friend-”

“But Asuka was already mid-flight.

Natsuko dodged her attack easily, and continued mostly dodging, occasionally deflecting strikes around the clearing. Sasuke discerned very quickly that Natsuko could have killed Asuka easily within seconds, but she refrained from doing so.
She issued several more verbal demands for Asuka to cease.

The pelican ignored them.

Natsuko body-flickered, landed in front of Sasuke-and burst into chakra smoke when her reserves were exhausted.

“Ha!” Asuka crowed. “I knew it! A clone!”

A shadow clone, Sasuke specified in his head, staring at where Natsuko had been moments ago. A shadow clone that he had not identified as one, despite living with it in one room. How long had the true Natsuko been gone? Where was she?

How had Sasuke not noticed?

Maybe she was right. Maybe he was entirely too dependent on the Sharingan, if he couldn’t detect such obvious jutsu use.

Of course, she used jutsu all the time – at least Henge, if not something more complicated – but this was just a pathetic lack of awareness on Sasuke’s part.

“That’s what she gets for pulling tricks on me!” Asuka announced.

Sasuke snarled. “And what do I tell Tsujimoto-san now?”

Asuka just shrugged her wings at him. “You’re a ninja. Figure something out.”

“Ow!”

“Nishi?” Genma asked of the tree line.

The tree line sounded like it was gritting its teeth when it spoke: “Naru—”

Genma reacted on instinct and dodged a cloud of senbon in the nick – heh – of time. He switched mind tracks from chuunin-chan’s unique attitude toward intra-team cooperation to the attacking Suna shinobi.

If they were Suna. But ninja whose go-to assassination technique was senbon (presumably poisoned) were fairly likely to be from Sand.

He slipped under a genjutsu and let a bunshin of himself continue dodging the enemy. There was only one enemy, and they were not all that skilled, apparently, because they followed the bunshin for several seconds, which gave Genma the chance to check that Nishi was still alive – he was – and get behind the attacker.

He retaliated with his own senbon, confident that they could get a live hostage-

Bastard disappeared from sight. Genma’s teeth clenched around the senbon, and he followed. Through the trees, and the undergrowth, away from the camp – aware that he was being lured, but also aware that there was a bunch of ‘friendly’ shadow clones seeded throughout the forest.

A dispersing puff of chakra smoke was all that remained left of one as Genma jumped across the free space over a brook. His fingers flew through a seal sequence-
He caught the nin into the face with a ball of water when a couple of Kage Bunshin and a ninken made him – *her?* – dodge away from his escape route.

It was a direct hit, and bastard breathed in enough water that he choked and stumbled over a tangle of roots.

Yeah, trees and water. Not exactly advantageous ground for a desert shinobi-

Genma dodged.

Some kind of Doton golem thing swung a very sharp sickle-end of a kusarigama through where Genma had just been standing. While he was busy dispatching the thing – it didn’t seem to register the damage, had superhuman strength and endurance, and really sucked at staying down when put down – he peripherally registered that someone had taken over the human enemy.

At some point the dirt monster just fell apart into a pile of inanimate dirt, so Genma moved back to check.

Chuunin-chan had opened the guy’s throat with… claws?

It was the first direct hit, but apparently kid had scored *a lot* of glancing ones before, because the corpse was covered in sets of parallel red lines all over. There was one set that stretched downwards across the crotch, and *very* nearly missed the femoral artery.

“You *savaged* that guy,” Nishi-sensei pointed out, stepping out of the trees. He looked like he had gotten into a fight himself – and won, obviously.

Genma was equal parts amused and put out that the kid had killed what could have been a useful hostage. Granted, if he hadn’t done it, Genma would have had to keep fighting the Doton monster, and it had started to annoy him, so… eh, it wasn’t like they could un-kill the Suna nin, anyway.

“Meow,” chuunin-chan drawled, making a pawing motion through the air with a very bloodied, very clawed hand.

His similarly bloodied ninen snorted. “Mum’s going to wash your maw out with soap.”

The kid huffed and pouted. It would have been cute, if, you know, he hadn’t just put down an enemy in an inefficient and painful way.

Kakashi turned up, looking bored and without a single smudge on him that wasn’t there half an hour ago, because he was a ninjutsu freak like that. He took a quick inventory of his team, confirmed that they were alive and no one required immediate medical attention. He nodded. “Clean-up. Genma-“

“Yeah, yeah,” Genma cut him off, aware of the standard division of labour. Kakashi would dispose of the bodies, Genma would try to hide the obvious signs of battle, Nishi would heal any sustained wounds – minor, luckily – and Naruto-

“Bath time, pups!” Pakkun smugly announced from Kakashi’s shoulder.

x

There was a knock on the front door of the apartment.

Iruka focused. He didn’t know the person standing there, but they were definitely a shinobi-

Eight paws rushed down the corridor as he was halfway across the hall.
He paused. There was a yelp, a growl, a whine, and Iruka leapt forwards to help the ninken – but the door wouldn’t budge. It was not locked. Someone had sealed it from the outside.

Pissed and terrified that he would be too late, he climbed out of the bedroom window and rushed along the outer wall of the building.

By the time he rounded the corner and the external corridor came within sight, there were only Guruko and Bisuke there, sitting on the matt in front of the apartment. The air smelled like grilled meat and burnt hair.

Iruka shuddered.

“All clear, Umino-sama,” said Iruka’s ANBU guard from wherever she – it sounded like a she – was hiding.

The next-door neighbour appeared on her threshold. “Umino-san, what is going on? Are you alright? I thought I heard fighting!”

Well, that sort of thing happened around shinobi, Iruka thought uncharitably. He was patently not in the mood for acting friendly at the moment. He was especially not in the mood to grin and bear Tanaka-san fluttering her eyelashes at him, just because over the course of the three years since she moved in she had not noticed that Iruka did not live alone (yes, he was aware that was not fair – in between Kakashi’s tendency to not let himself be seen and the privacy seals, no civilian had a chance to notice).

Bisuke barked.

Viciously.

Tanaka-san and Iruka both flinched. Bisuke was usually very personable; Iruka didn’t think he had ever heard a sound like that come from him.


He crouched down to the ninken. Bisuke relented and cuddled up to him, the faker, but Guruko continued baring his teeth at the neighbour.

Tanaka-san took the hint, excused herself in return, and disappeared inside her apartment.

Iruka ripped the seal from the seam of his door and herded the dogs inside. Once they had their privacy, he gave them a strict look, crossed his arms and started tapping his index finger on his elbow. This usually worked on trouble-makers.

“Oh, right.” Bisuke squirmed. “Hi, Iruka?”


Iruka wasn’t falling for that. “…hello.”

“We are… uhm… We-”

“-have been following me around since Kakashi left, yes, I noticed,” Iruka filled in dryly.

The two ninken relaxed, now that it was obvious that Iruka wasn’t angry with them.
As if Iruka could have missed being stalked by two dogs – even if they were ninja dogs – for two months. He worked at the Hokage Tower; no one could loiter around the Tower and remain unnoticed. Guruko and Bisuke had not been bothered because they were well-known, and the ANBU simply accepted them as Iruka’s guard. Which they were, if only on an unofficial basis.

Iruka wished they had been enough of a guard.

“Sorry?” Bisuke piped, raising his head up to give Iruka the most pathetic wet puppy-dog eyes in existence.

Iruka raised his eyebrows in return. Did the little rascal think that would work?

“But seriously,” said Guruko, “we’re sorry we didn’t protect you well enough.”

Iruka relented; he leant down and scratched behind Guruko’s ear. “Explain to me what happened just now, and I may decide to throw you a bone.”

x

“Home,” Tsujimoto-san skeptically repeated after Sasuke.

Sasuke nodded, trying to look worried. How did somebody look worried? He was mostly trying to mimic Sakura before the Chuunin Exams, but he wasn’t sure if that conveyed the correct emotion. “Her Mother’s health got worse,” he offered, desperately improvising. “She got an urgent missive.”

Jiraiya did say something about a Mother, right? And Tsujimoto-san mentioned her, too, didn’t he?

Tsujimoto-san sighed and waved his hand. “Whatever. As long as you can manage on your own, I don’t care.”

Sasuke nodded.

He wasn’t entirely confident, but Natsuko had done everything by herself before Sasuke came along, so surely he would be able to keep up?

He wished he could create a shadow clone. That would make this whole assignment so much easier.

In fact, a shadow clone under a Henge would have made a passable Natsuko decoy.

This way, Sasuke would just have to endure.

He despised this mission.

And he was going to cook Asuka in a soup.

….as soon as he managed to defeat her in a fight.

x

It wasn’t an unusual sight.

Inoichi dead to the world, sprawled almost artfully on the carpet. Half a bar’s worth of bottles lined up on the kotatsu. Yoshino melted into an armchair, pupils blown so wide someone could drown in all that darkness. The clock showing it was nearly eleven-

Well. That was unusual. Usually they didn’t get to this level of inebriation before two in the morning.
Shikaku quickly went through his mental list of the recent FUBAR situations and made an educated guess: “The fake ANBU?”

Yoshino blinked at him. “Uh… that too, I guess… ‘biki said ‘nko ditched teenaaai…”

It was Shikaku’s turn to blink. And translate. Ah, right – if Anko had been assigned on a mission, Ibiki might have requested Inoichi as temporary support, which in addition to being the head of the intelligence team responsible for figuring out where the fuck all these fake ANBU were coming from might have put Inoichi under a spectacular amount of pressure.

“…but ‘s more that ‘no’s moved out…” Yoshino concluded.

Ah, shit, thought Shikaku. That would drive Inoichi straight to drinking, no further stress required. After losing his wife he had gone a little single-minded in his efforts to protect his daughter, and Shikaku tried to help him figure out how to accept that Ino was now a kunoichi with all the danger that went with it, but the thing that seemed to help most was getting drunk with Yoshino.

“I thought breakfast today was strangely quiet,” Shikaku remarked dryly.

Yoshino quirked a smile for a moment, before melancholy erased it from her face. “‘ichi fucked up.”

Shikaku sighed. “Inevitable.”

Inoichi’s thin veneer of accepting Ino’s career was bound to crack at some point and clue the girl in. And it wasn’t even that he didn’t have faith in his daughter, or that he wouldn’t support her – he was just plain shit-scared that he would lose her. Understandable. But still messed up.

“‘e was fine when she’s ‘ere,” Yoshino explained. “Now she’s gone.”

Bullshit. “It would take him half an hour to find her – at most.”

“She doesn’t wanna see ‘m.” Yoshino took a gulp from her cocktail. Her eyes moved away from Shikaku’s, and then seemed to un-focus until she probably couldn’t see anything but blurs of brown and grey and black. “Why don’t our kids trust us, Shika?”

Shikaku prided himself on knowing both his wife and his son, so he was doubly blindsided – by the question she asked him, and by the fact that he didn’t have an answer for her.

Had they all fucked up?

X

Ex-Sand nukenin deciding to attack Team Kakashi was a nice diversion, but it barely broke the tedium anymore.

After the Sound provocateurs were repatriated and a truce with the Village Hidden in the Sand was established, ‘preventing a war’ turned out to be a lot of roaming the mountains, interrogating the locals, chasing rumours and, once, meeting an actual informant.

The four of them didn’t do much. They didn’t have to. The whole point was to attract enough attention that they would draw to them all Suna dissidents and assorted opportunists, after Baki strategically leaked the information about ‘these nosy Konoha spies’.

“We’re waiting for something, right?” asked Nishi-sensei in the wake of yet another ambush, which Naruto’s perimeter of clones had detected far in advance, and the two former ANBU operatives
dispatched before anyone could come within a kunai-throw of the medic.

“Bored, Nishi-kun?” asked senbon guy, grinning a little, like this was the best fun he had had in a while.

Naruto knew for a fact that senbon guy had himself been bored to tears lately.

“Somewhat,” admitted Nishi-sensei. “More nervous about what it is we’re waiting for. And I would really love to get back home.”

Naruto understood that they were acting as provocateurs now, with the intention to flush out those people who wanted a war, but that seemed like a mission that could go on forever, and they were already a month overdue for return.

Dog-taichou barely even smelled like Iruka-sensei anymore. It was so weird. Naruto hadn’t ever known either of them without smelling the other one on him.

It made him feel sad and lonely. Kinda… huh, was this what ‘homesick’ meant?

Dog-taichou without Iruka-sensei. Iruka-sensei without Dog-taichou. Either was unthinkable. Either made him feel like the one that wasn’t there was dead, and that was just so far away from okay that it raised his hackles. It made him want to howl in pain and loss.

He had to remind himself that Iruka-sensei was perfectly fine and anxiously awaiting their return to the village.

“Yeah, home,” senbon guy agreed glumly. He crossed his arms behind his head and stared upwards at the sky (at least rain season had ended a fortnight ago). “Thing is, our esteemed team lead never met a deadline he could not extend through the power of sheer impudence. So.” He shrugged.

Nishi-sensei sighed.

Naruto briefly considered summoning Rikku, but then he decided that he could take a little loneliness. The summoning could wait until tonight, before Naruto went to sleep (he probably wouldn’t be able to sleep otherwise).

He had sent Juuji and Annai home, because they were getting tired and depressed, too, and there was no point to keeping them here all the time. They needed their rest – because Nishi-sensei was totally right, and Dog-taichou was waiting for something.

Something big and, knowing Dog-taichou, bloody.

Chapter End Notes

I’ve done so much editing on this, holy hell, it was a mess. So, if you spot inconsistencies, please let me know and I’ll try to salvage this.
Bisuke did not expect to be summoned tonight.

And since he was unexpectedly summoned, he popped out ready to bite through some enemy shinobi’s hamstrings…

…but there were no enemy shinobi. He sniffed Kakashi, and Naruto, and the other two humans, and came to the conclusion that he had seen almost as much action on his bodyguard duty in the village as this elite team did in hostile surroundings.

Just figured.

“Bisuke! Hi! Wow, you smell like-”

“Hands off!” Kakashi knocked Naruto aside, into a tree-

-Naruto twisted in midair and stuck to the tree in a horizontal squat.

A moment later he was diving into the puppy pile again. “Don’t hog the Iruka-sensei-smell!”

“Don’t rub it off!”

The two man-puppies glared at one another; Bisuke rolled his eyes at them (although, to be honest, he understood their reaction perfectly fine).

The rest of their team watched as the two shinobi crouched down in front of a little dog – yeah, Bisuke had no delusions about his body type, and no qualms about using it to his advantage – to sniff him. A lot.

“I’ve seen Kakashi-taichou do a lot of weird things over the years, but this takes the cake,” muttered the medic.

“Nah,” said the one with beef jerky in his pouch. “This is normal. The thing he did to those lost Iwa gennin was weirder. Sure, I get that he doesn’t like Iwa, but that was some next level crap.”

Bisuke remembered that time. It was the usual shit situation that got kids killed – an Iwa gennin team on a mission to Grass met someone they shouldn’t have, their jounin stayed behind and told them to run, and the idiots ran straight over the border into the Land of Fire.

Where they bumped into a Konoha ANBU team.

They got out of it physically intact (probably not mentally, but Bisuke agreed that it was funny) because Kakashi was a softie when it came to kids.

Well, no, he wasn’t. But he also wasn’t the kind of guy that would kill three children for no reason. And he was even nice enough to chase them off in the right direction, so.

“I thought the tentacled guardian of the forest that hungered for their nubile flesh was inspired,” Bisuke said cheerfully, and turned the full force of his puppy eyes at Naruto, who was less resistant to them. “Pets?”

Naruto extended his hand, but faltered before he touched Bisuke’s fur. His eyes welled. “I’m so sorry! I can’t! I just miss Iruka-sensei…”

The Hog's Watch
“Yeah about that…” Bisuke thought really hard about it, and then decided that Kakashi’s mate had a right to make his own decisions, and that he had a bunch of protectors, so there was no need for Kakashi to drop everything and run home to swaddle his hedgehog in wool (he could just imagine that epic row, complete with explosions and excessive pranking). He sighed. “He wrote a letter?” Which was supposed to be delivered tomorrow.

Because, yeah, Iruka took the news of assassins knocking on his door and ANBU counterassassination happening on his literal doorstep only a little bit better than he took being sealed in by Tiger-san ‘for his own safety’. Bisuke’s and Guruko’s combined efforts did not manage to stop Iruka from trying to get in the ANBU’s face – which resulted in Boar-san’s intervention.

Good Inari, could Iruka get prickly if you annoyed him…

Kakashi gave Bisuke a deadpan stare. “What happened to undercover?”

Bisuke shrugged. “Duty called. I totally scared off that woman that lives next door when she made eyes at him.” It was even true, so that kind of made it less of a lie. Right?

Kakashi’s stare became somehow even deadpan-er.

Uuugh, he was totally onto Bisuke. But Bisuke was telling him nuffink. Nuf-fink.

Strength of conviction he had, but he also realised that the leader of his hunt was a lot better at extracting information than Bisuke was at keeping secrets, so he tossed the folded-up piece of paper at Kakashi’s toes, hopped onto Naruto’s thigh, licked his face in apology for taking away the scent of family so fast, and unsummoned himself.

x

Kakashi read Iruka-sensei’s letter. His face showed exactly nothing, but under the acrid soldier-pill smell (better now than it had been a few of weeks ago, but still strong enough that it was obvious he wasn’t sleeping much – almost like he didn’t trust the team, huh?) he went all pissed and worried.

“Saa…”

Naruto wanted to go back to Konoha. Not just because he missed it, and his precious people, but also so that he would be able to stop whatever that bad thing was that made Dog anxious. Dog was never anxious.

Naruto stealth-patted his shoulder and then quickly took a strategic position behind senbon guy’s back. “Don’t worry ‘bout Iruka-sensei. I’m pretty sure he won’t go missing and come hunt us down. And I don’t think he’ll turn the village into a smoking ruin either, but I’m a little less certain about that.”

Senbon guy glanced over his shoulder, but coolly let himself be used as a shield.

“You know your sensei well.” Kakashi’s eye strayed to the kanji on the paper in his hand.

Naruto quite desperately wanted to know what was written there, but no matter how good his nose was, it could not read. Reading was the exclusive skill of an eye. Sadly. Naruto’s eyes were nothing special – not like Hinata’s or Sasuke-bastard’s.

“Eh,” Naruto grumbled. Iruka-sensei was a tough nut to crack, and you had to go carefully about the cracking, because damaging Iruka-sensei was a fast way of getting yourself chidori’d in the dead of night. “He doesn’t really let anyone close. You know you gotta trick it out of him.”
“How do you trick him, if he can read minds?” asked senbon guy. He looked genuinely curious, but Naruto was pretty sure the tokujou was making fun of him – especially after Nishi-sensei snorted.

Naruto made a face at the back of the guy’s head. “I guess most people aren’t willing to put in the effort.”

Kakashi – who had in the meantime reduced the letter to ash, showing off his super-awesome chakra control – pointed out: “You did.”

“That’s ‘cause I knew he was Dog’s, and Dog wouldn’t have kept him if he wasn’t worth it.”

There was a while of silence. Crickets didn’t chirp, because there weren’t any this high up in the mountains, but somewhere in the distance a raptor screeched to almost the same effect.

Then Nishi-sensei and senbon guy started snickering.

At Kakashi.

Naruto reflexively kawarimi’d-

-just in time, too, because Kakashi’s shadow clone poked Naruto’s replacement shadow clone with Thousand Years of Pain. That wasn’t exactly fun even second-hand.

x

“I apologise,” Sasuke said when he came up after locking the doors and found Natsuko lying in her bed, going through the couple of reports from Jiraiya’s contacts that Sasuke had received in her name while she was gone.

The words had almost stuck in his throat, and needed to be forcefully pressed out. It did not quite hurt, but it made him think back to Asuka’s attack on Natsuko, and he felt uncomfortable about his role in it. He had not anticipated it, and had not condoned it – but he hadn’t done enough to stop it.

“You will do better next time,” Natsuko muttered, both as a reassurance and a demand.

Sasuke nodded. He sat down, viscerally glad to be off his feet. He did not understand how Natsuko had managed all the work on her own, plus the missions elsewhere. Even with shadow clones, that must have been terribly exhausting. It certainly wouldn’t be helping her health.

And speaking of her health, Sasuke had spent so much time going over his memories of what he had discovered to have been the clone, that several oddities came to his attention.

“Did the clone seem so sick for authenticity?” he inquired. “I’d think conserving chakra would be more of a priority?” There weren’t any long-term lodgers at the inn; Sasuke and Tsujimoto-san were the only ones that might notice if Natsuko’s health suddenly slightly improved. And they both already knew that she wasn’t who she claimed to be, so what was the point?

“The clone functions as my physical body does.” Natsuko sighed. “Lately that means badly.”

So, Sasuke thought, while her clone crawled into bed and shuddered until the tremors ceased, the real her had been somewhere in the field and probably did not have any such luxury as back-up. Unless, of course, she trusted her mark with that, too.

“I… am sorry if Asuka damaged any objectives.” Saying the words hurt only a little more than a punch to the face, and Sasuke managed to keep his stoic composure well enough.
“Tomio-kun…” Natsuko gifted him with one of her half-smiles. “The only way you could have known that I was a clone was if you were a sensor, or if you had activated your doujutsu. I am glad that I can trust your word.”

Sasuke stared at the wall for a while and then nodded.

Natsuko did not take his lack of grace personally, and instead shifted her attention to the coded reports.

She could read the code, apparently. As in, she could do the decryption in her head.

That was… Sasuke didn’t have words for what it was. Even if they were using a simple substitution code – which Jiraiya’s elite agents would not have done – that required a genius-level mental capacity. Sasuke had tried to make some sense of the text, but gotten nowhere.

He had known that Natsuko had a multitude of skills, and yet he found himself stunned once again.

Filled with new determination to do better, he pulled out a handful of shuriken and focused on doing little tricks with them, intending to train his chakra control until it was absolutely perfect.

x

Adjusting to life under constant supervision was sapping Iruka’s energy and patience faster than he could replenish it. He hated everything about it – short of, of course, staying alive.

“Don’t make that face at me!” he snapped at Boar-san, who was the only one of Iruka’s ANBU worth snapping at, because he was the one Tsunade-sama had put in charge of the operation.

“This is my mask,” Boar-san replied tonelessly.

Iruka glared at him over the head of cabbage he had been examining.

Boar-san didn’t acknowledge the glare at all, but of course he must have been royally amused by Iruka’s frustration, when he should have been awed by the restraint Iruka showed in not lobbing the cabbage at Boar’s stupid mask.

Iruka put the cabbage down; he wanted to smash it, but he also wanted to not be banned from this store later.

Oh, kami damn it all.

He grabbed what he had already managed to gather – which was sadly limited to two glasses of blueberry jam (for strawberry-related reasons), a pound of onions and some asparagus – and strode to the cashier to pay for it. He managed a vapid smile for the lady, and left without engaging in the usual small talk, leaving his guard to scramble after him.

Which, naturally, the ANBU did with grace and dignity.

Kami-damned jounin.

Iruka stopped at the first Akimichi-owned restaurant he saw, ducked in, asked for a table for two, and ordered two plates of stir-fry.

“Is that… all, Umino-sama?” the waitress asked nervously.

Fantastic, Iruka thought, now that he warranted ANBU escort his reputation reached the civilians,
and he was never going to be able to so much as grocery shop without enduring all the bowing and the obsequious suffixes, as if he was some kind of nobility. They treated him like he saw Clan Heads being treated. The less uptight ones, at least.

“And tea, please. Something soothing – whatever you have that is good. I’ll trust your recommendation.”

His smile must have looked pained, because she simply bowed and hurried away to complete his order.

Boar-san appeared in the chair opposite Iruka without a sound. “It is my duty to-”

“Keep me alive,” Iruka cut in, uninterested in how the ANBU would have been more comfortable hiding in the shadows of the rafters. “Which, since I am a mere human, sadly includes the occasional consumption of food. Pathetic, I know-”

“Umino-sama,” Boar-san said, with just a hint of exasperation.

That was more emotion than Iruka had managed to wring from him in days. He counted it as a success. He was hungry, and he couldn’t cook his own food in the comfort and familiarity of his own kitchen because grocery runs have suddenly become complicated, and even eating at a restaurant has turned into a damn production.

Soon enough he would end up like Naruto – eating every second meal at the Ichiraku, for the mere fact that he was treated as a person there.

“If I may make a recommendation?”

“Sure,” Iruka agreed. He was always willing to hear out advice; he wasn’t so universally prepared to follow it, but it never hurt to know how somebody else would solve a problem.

“Make a list of what you wish to buy and hire a gennin team for a D-rank. I believe that is the usual method.”

Oh. Right. That made sense. Hokage-sama also did not buy her own groceries, surely, and she did not have a Clan to take care of these small everyday chores. She did not have a Clan anymore.

He sympathised.

“You’re not worried about poisoning?” Iruka inquired.

Boar-san nodded. “At all times, Umino-sama. I am proficient at detecting poisons, and I will still personally taste both meals before you eat.”

“Unacceptable,” Iruka snapped.

And he got where Boar-san was coming from – of course he did – but he had never, and would never, think of his own life as worth more than any other life in Konoha.

“Not up for debate,” Boar-san snapped back. “I am responsible for your life, Umino-sama, and I shall not fail my mission, regardless of what sort of sacrifice is required. That is my obligation and my oath.”

Stop interfering, chuunin, Iruka heard clearly.

“Y-your tea… Umino-sama…” the waitress piped, sounding terrified.
Iruka, grimly aware that there was nothing he could do at this point to reassure her that everything was well, simply nodded to her and shifted to the side to allow her to place the tray onto the table. Boar-san’s hands twitched when the woman leaned into Iruka’s personal space, as if she was a suspected assassin.

Perhaps everybody was a suspected assassin at this point, Iruka mused, while Boar-san checked the tea with some unfamiliar chakra-sensing technique, a set of seals, and then poured himself a cup.

“This is so unnecessary-”

“We have already stopped three assassination attempts on you-”

“Three?!” Iruka exclaimed, drawing the attention of the handful of other guests. At least his outburst only included one innocuous word rather than any compromising information.

Boar-san turned his mask to Iruka, and somehow managed to project just how unimpressed he was with his charge.

“Why wasn’t I informed of the third one?” Iruka demanded.

Boar-san actually shrugged – he was so annoyed with Iruka that he had broken character. It was almost a back-handed compliment. “Not my purview.”

“Well, from now on it will be your purview, or the purview of any one of my guards, because I’m not a civilian, alright? I may not be a jounin, but that doesn’t mean I’m useless. And I need to know what in kami-sama’s name is happening!”

Boar-san stared at him for a moment, and then reached out to pour tea into the second cup. “It’s not poisoned.”

Iruka was going to strangle him.

“Report?” Tsunade asked, standing on top of the Hospital roof and contemplating if she should take up smoking. It had done wonders for Hiruzen-sensei, by all accounts.

Maybe that was the secret to not losing your will to live while wearing the Hokage Hat.

Boar exchanged a couple of handsigns with the ANBU on Tsunade’s tail, and was allowed to approach her.

“Mission so far successful,” he reported, sounding about ready to fall asleep standing upright.

Tsunade had known that the kid was going to be a handful and a half, but to have exhausted an ANBU detachment within a few days was impressive. No wonder her Shadow was so gleeful, and planning to train little Umino into an elite diplomat. If all this power of irritation and bloody-minded obstinacy could be directed at their political opposition, Umino would become a widely feared asset of Konoha.

Which, to the ANBU’s continued grief (and Tsunade’s amusement), would mean a permanent guard rotation on the boy.

On the other hand, that meant they’d have to keep the boy alive long enough.

“You expect failure?” she asked, scowling.
Boar shifted, hand rising minutely before he checked whatever that gesture was going to be. “The prognosis is bleak,” he allowed. “Umino-sama seems to have a chip on his shoulder the size of a denied promotion.”

Tsunade snorted. She couldn’t help it. The idea was almost cute in its ingenuousness. “Does he.”

Boar hesitated, and then allowed himself an utterly unprofessional sigh. “I may have implied that his participation on his own security was unnecessary, which he took as a slight to his rank.”

“Which you meant, rank-snob,” muttered one of Tsunade’s guards behind her back.

Boar didn’t react, but he did not react a little too obviously.

She scowled. She had no time for snobbery, and her Shadow was not known for coddling anybody’s inferiority complexes. “I know you could kill Umino, Boar, but unless you could do his job, pack it up and treat him like the fucking national treasure he is, understood?”

“Yes, Hokage-sama,” the ANBU forced through clenched teeth.

She nodded to herself. “Dismissed.”

Boar vanished.

Tsunade looked over her shoulder. “Porcupine, keep your commentary to yourself. And message Cat to bring up a case of sake when you switch off.”

She needed medication to deal with it when her elite ANBU acted like jealous children.

It was still better than polluting her lungs with soot and tar.
“Stop distracting me, Ino,” Sakura complained, chewing a strand of hair. “This is hard.”

“You’re not going to win anyway,” Ino replied, and then huffed when Sakura ignored her.

Sakura stared at the board. The game wasn’t lost yet, but she had a creeping suspicion that Ino was right.

*He’s just stringing you along*, commented Inner. *Bastard could have crushed you ten minutes ago, but you’re not even a challenge. He’s not playing to win – he gave himself handicap rules so he wouldn’t die of boredom.*

Sakura gritted her teeth.

Shikamaru was slumped back against the balcony railing and, with eyes narrowed to slits, stared at the sky.

It was way quieter and more subdued than what Sakura imagined when Ino invited her for an apartment-warming party. And she still didn’t know why Ino moved out of the Yamanaka Clan House – she wasn’t sure she bought the ‘proving her independence’ excuse.

*Sure fucking beats having to explain to Mum where you were so late, pointed out Inner. I bet she’s got a boyfriend and doesn’t want her Dad sticking his nose into it.*

Ino’s Dad was even scarier than Ino. He could scare away any boy. Besides, Sakura completely understood wanting that freedom. Maybe she’d ask Ino if she didn’t want a roommate? The apartment would be big enough for two once all the boxes were put away-

“**Ino!**” Chouji’s voice came from inside. “Where do you keep your strainer?”

“No idea!” Ino yelled back, making Sakura flinch.

Shikamaru was apparently too used to this to even blink.

“Honestly, does he think I’ve randomly taken up cooking? *He’s* the designated *provider*. *He’s* the one who stocked that kitchen,” Ino grumbled, climbing to her feet. “I’m going to help him look.” She disappeared inside.

Shikamaru moved a stone and, after a few seconds of silence, said: “You can ask.”

“Ask what?” Sakura replied – too fast, too fake – and made her own move. The game was already lost, anyway, and even if she won, Inner would never let her forget that the whole thing was orchestrated by Shikamaru from start to finish. Apparently, this was what Ino meant when she claimed Shikamaru was a genius.

Sakura was beginning to see it.

Shikamaru shrugged, as if he couldn’t even be bothered to say ‘whatever’.

Sakura sighed. Still, if he had already seen through her, there was no point to not asking, was there? She bit her lip, took a deep breath to steel herself and – with a cautious glance at the open door to the disaster zone that would one day become Ino’s new living room – very quietly said: “What happened to Sasuke-kun?”
Shikamaru looked directly at her for the first time. His eyes were still narrowed, and it felt like he was dissecting her – like he could see deep into Sakura’s insides. It made her shudder.

Then he shrugged. “He left. He was determined enough to stay away that he managed to dodge my Mother, and that’s very determined – ugh.” He moved a stone.

Unless Sakura was missing something, he had won.

Apparently, he had only strung her along long enough to get her to talk about Sasuke-kun. And was Chouji in on it, too? Had he called Ino away on purpose? Was their teamwork that good?

Sakura found herself envying them. Envyng Ino, specifically. Sakura had been so happy to be assigned on a team with Sasuke-kun, and so mad that she would have to deal with Naruto, and then it turned out that Naruto was, maybe, sort of alright, and Ino’s two totally lame teammates were actually secretly really good ninja. While Sasuke-kun…

“But, he’s okay?” she asked. “He was not really kidnapped?”

Shikamaru shook his head. “He left on his own.”

Sakura nodded. Not what she wanted to hear – but, in the end, even though it hurt to be discarded like so much trash by the boy she had liked so much, she would rather that Sasuke-kun was alive and free than that Sasuke-kun had been hurt and forced and possibly dead.

“Hinata!” Kiba called out, pushing his shoulder into Akamaru’s to get the ninken to release him.

“Hello,” Hinata replied sedately. She did not flinch anymore when Kiba jumped toward her, nor when he put his arm around her shoulders. Her cheeks pinked faintly, but she smiled as she settled into Kiba’s side.

Shino greatly enjoyed the look of utter bemusement on their sensei’s face.

“Have you been cleared for training then?” he asked, although he did not honestly expect a negative response.

Hinata was originally supposed to have been cleared for light duty more than a week ago, but she had spent the last two weeks ‘recuperating at home’, and the iryounin were dissatisfied with her recovery. Shino and Kiba had their own opinion of the reasons, but as long as they could prove nothing, and Hinata was not speaking up, there was little they could do.

Except, perhaps, exert pressure on Goat Boy to put a stop to it.

He made a mental note to revisit the idea later, at a more opportune moment.

“How are you feeling, Hinata?” asked Kurenai-sensei, coming closer to greet the prodigal team member. She brushed Hinata’s hair out of her face – where Hinata used to have her fringe shortened to keep her eyes clear, her hair had grown out enough to cover her mouth.

“Happy,” Hinata replied cheerfully, smiling.

Shino lowered his head so he could trade looks with Kiba over the top of his glasses. Happy to be out of the Compound, they both inferred.

“Yeah, so are we,” Kiba assured her. “Sakura’s alright as a temporary replacement – aside from, you
know, being barking mad—"

“Kiba!” protested both Kurenai-sensei and Hinata.

“-but we’re glad to have you back. Right, Shino?”

Shino nodded. “Sakura is, indeed, quite peculiar.”

Kurenai-sensei redirected her scowl from Kiba to Shino, but Hinata giggled, and that made their jounin teacher’s displeasure well worth it.

After Sakura stopped acting like Team Eight were her enemies, she was competent enough, if weak at both taijutsu and ninjutsu. She had interesting perspectives and a wealth of theoretical knowledge. Shino did not mind training or completing D-rank missions with her.

But he did not miss her. He, too, was happy at Hinata’s return.

“Less gossiping and more warming up, please,” Kurenai-sensei ordered, clapping her hands.

“Hinata, you must let me know immediately if you feel off. No pushing yourself – we don’t want you to set back your recovery.”

Shino watched as the long shadows of the morning sun stretched toward him, growing claws and teeth and red eyes and, bored of this particular game, interrupted the flow of his chakra.

The shadows returned to their original shapes.

Ten yards over, Kiba and Akamaru jumped around to evade the attacks of Kurenai-sensei’s genjutsu.

x

It was a dark day; heavy grey rainclouds hung overhead and hid the tops of the mountains; tall pines towered over the valley like sentinels, and Kakashi-taichou was being annoying by not telling anybody what the heck was going on with the damn mission.

“If this mission gets extended for another week, I’m going to lose my place on the Medical Committee,” complained Nishi-sensei.

“We’re going to miss the planning for the Festival,” added senbon guy. “I bet someone’s going to volunteer me for something if I’m not there.”

“Yeah,” grumbled Naruto, “I bet all my plants are dead.” He had asked Kono to take care of them, but Kono was nine, and had an attention span like Naruto after a whole Deluxe box of mochi.

And three months was a long time.

Kakashi-taichou dumped a two-foot-long fish in front of Naruto, silently commanding him to get to cooking their dinner. They hadn’t had cooked dinner in days. Apparently, he was out of patience, too, and decided to signal whoever might be interested in finding them that they were right here.

“We all are missing out on important things,” taichou announced, finding a comfortable spot between the roots of a tree, with his back to its trunk (and Naruto hoped that he’d get a whole lot of resin in his hair). “The illustrated edition of Icha Icha Gentleman has been out for weeks.”

Naruto snorted from the edge of the clearing, where he was gathering small pieces of wood to start a fire. “Yeah, but the paperback’s been out for, what, ten years? Like you don’t know the story by heart, Kentarou-san.” He looked up to stick out his tongue-
And had the unique pleasure of seeing Kakashi choke on nothing and start coughing.

Naruto stared (and he wasn’t the only one). Wow. Had he just… had he just successfully thrown off Dog?

So cool.

Once he caught his breath, Kakashi predictably reacted by pretending to melodramatically wipe a tear from his eye. “My cute little student has lost his innocence-”

“I lost my innocence the first time you made Itoshii-sensei late for class with your morning activities.” Naruto retorted, rolling his eyes and dumping his handfuls of sticks into the pit senbon guy had dug out for the fire.

Senbon guy stabbed himself with the senbon as he tried to muffle his sniggers in his sleeve. Nishi-sensei’s hands were all covered with fish-guts, so he just laughed freely.

Uuhei and Urushi bounded out of the forest to see what was going on.

Kakashi didn’t quite choke this time, but it was taking him a moment to recover from the realisation that Naruto had not only read Ero Ero Paradigm, but also connected its protagonists to their real-life counterparts.

“Maa,” he finally said, after Naruto got a little fire going, “I think Iruka would have told me if we were going public.”

“I’m not public!” Naruto protested. “And he didn’t tell me. I figured it out myself, from when you were stalking me when I was little.”

“Stalking?” Nishi-sensei asked, frowning at taichou.

“Guard duty,” senbon guy assured him. He wasn’t exactly right, because Dog had spent a lot more time on Naruto’s tail – ha! – than just official guarding. After Kana-san and Ya-san taught Naruto to use his sense of smell, he kept a nose out for the lying-masked ninja.

Dog still continued coming by after all the others stopped. So did Dove, sometimes, when she wanted to watch the Phantom of Konoha prank someone. Or give him tips.

“I’d swear Iruka’s clueless,” said Uuhei. “But Bisuke’d know for sure.”

Taichou levelled a skeptical look at Naruto.

Naruto rolled his eyes. “Back when we fought Mizuki-bastard, I told him Iruka-sensei’s boyfriend would fuck him up. Sensei was right there. He knows I know.” It wasn’t like Naruto had ever hidden that he knew. And he knew that Iruka pretended for other people that he was single – which was probably the only way to avoid the terrible embarrassment of being known as Kakashi’s squeeze.

“Maa…” taichou drawled while Urushi tried to beg for senbon guy’s jerky. “I’ve heard you rather fucked Mizuki up yourself, Naruto.”

Naruto so had. He was very proud of himself, and not just ‘cause it finally won him the hitai-ate. He had beat up a chuunin. He had protected Iruka-sensei. He had rocked.

He punched the air. “Believe it! You were out on a mission – I took care of that for you.”

Kakashi tilted his head to the side, contemplating for a moment, and then said: “Thank you.”
Senbon guy muttered something disbelieving about their team lead’s unexpected capability of expressing gratitude, echoed by Nishi-sensei’s agreeing grumble.

Naruto just grinned. “My absolute pleasure.”

Iruka hadn’t had much time to spend thinking about Kakashi lately, even though there were so many fleeting moments when he saw or heard something that triggered the association.

But now he was lying in their bed, alone, hearing the echoing emptiness of the apartment with only a single ninjūn guard in the hallway. There was an ANBU outside the window, and another one on the roof of the building – he could clearly distinguish them from the neighbours.

He was too tired to sleep. Exhausted. The sheer frustration was driving him to crying, but at the same time he wasn’t going to cry with strangers watching him. He wasn’t going to do anything with strangers watching him but rigidly lie here and hope for the embrace of sweet unconsciousness.

On another night, thinking about Kakashi would inspire him to touch himself, perhaps, and help him alleviate some of the tension – but he wasn’t a show for the ANBU to watch.

He just missed Kakashi so viscerally that his stomach ached with it.

“What’s up with you, chew toy?” Anko demanded when Iruka nearly walked into her. She barely saved her precious dango from hitting the ground.

“Sor-ry,” he stammered, blinking like he had only just woken up. “Ah, it’s nothing Anko-san. I just did not sleep well.”

Anko checked the nearby roofs; there was Lynx crouching over the eaves of the Hokage Tower. His fingers folded to indicate first danger and then mission successful.

Fuck. Maybe Anko should ask for a temporary reassignment. Sure, ‘biki-kun would probably pop a vein if she bailed on him again, but no way was any shitstain getting their filthy murderous hands on Iruka.

“Pull the other one.” She selected a stick with five dumplings on it from her box and pressed it into Iruka’s hand. That was guaranteed uncontaminated food, and Lynx fucking knew it, so he could stop making that hand-sign. “You know what you look like? You look lonely. That means you’re going out with me tonight, and we’ll paint the fucking town red.”

She was having a tutoring session with Neji-boy in the afternoon, but after that she was free as a bird. A bird with clipped wings, but, semantics.

Iruka absently chewed on the third dumpling, having scarfed the first two. He shouldn’t have been that hungry. Didn’t he feed himself? Usually he was the one who hovered over everybody and made sure they ate enough.

Was he so stressed that he had lost his appetite?

“Yeah, definitely taking you out drinking-”

“If you figure out how,” he replied despondently, and ambled off into the Tower like a convict.
Aya-sempai was only about a year older than Sakura, and so smart that Sakura felt a little intimidated. She was probably at least part Nara, but Sakura hadn’t found a polite way of asking yet. Aya-sempai was a little… not aloof, exactly, but friendly in an unapproachable way. Like the friendliness itself was her means of keeping people at arm’s length.

She wasn’t… well, wasn’t very pretty, to be honest, and she dyed her hair bright, picking a new colour every couple of weeks or so as the mood struck her – by her own admission.

“It’s not that I haven’t found one I like,” she explained toward the end of the orientation, when Sakura asked (it seemed like a safer topic than her family background), “it’s just that I really like most of them. Except for that mauve disaster last year, that was terrible. But why limit myself to just one?”

Aya was ahead of Sakura in the program, but they would not spend much time together, because Aya was specialising in pediatrics.

“Kids go crazy for the colours,” she said, grinning.

Sakura could imagine it. Two or three years ago she herself would have loved it if her doctor had dark blue and turquoise hair. “How did you know you wanted to specialise in kids’ medicine?”

“I actually started out wanting to work with kids, and then the options were practically limited to healing or teaching at the Academy,” Aya-sempai explained. She checked the clock and clucked her tongue. “I’ve got to run, Sakura-”

Sakura bowed. “Thank you for taking the time from your schedule to show me around.”

Aya-sempai smiled, the sort of smile Ino used at the flower shop. “My pleasure. For what it’s worth, I wish you luck. And if it doesn’t work out, you can sign up again during the next intake.”

Sakura bowed again, while Aya-sempai perfunctorily waved and hurried off toward the staircase. Once she was alone, Sakura sighed. Trying to catch up to other students that had months of studying behind themselves was too ambitious. Why was she doing this again?

And what the fuck else would you do until March? inquired inner Sakura. Go home and moon over a traitor?

Shut up, Sakura thought at herself, and strode off toward the nurses’ break room, where she had left the scrubs Aya-sempai got for her. Tomorrow Sakura would come in dressed for work, and hopefully start learning some techniques.

Tonight she was going to brush up on her anatomy-

Anatomy, huh? drawled Inner. Whose anatomy, though? Could it be S-E-N-S-

Shut up before I go over to the Psychiatric Department and report your existence to the first shrink I meet, she snapped at herself.

Inner shut up.

Who would have thought? Sakura had finally come up with a viable threat.
“I treated them with respect!” Iruka complained into his beer. “I gave them all the information they needed. I bought them food when I was eating – what more do they want?!”

Anko was beginning to see the root of the mutual frustration between the doggy treat and his ANBU detail. “You can’t do that.”

“What?”

“That. Talk to them. Feed them.” Anko took a gulp of her own drink. She wasn’t much for beer, but two shots of rum poured into the glass improved it considerably. The bartenders in this joint knew her, so she didn’t even have to ask for the addition. “Look, when you’ve got a contingent of normal guards, that sort of thing’s mostly okay. But these are ANBU. You shouldn’t bring attention to them. Just pretend they’re not there.”

“Pretend they’re not there…?” Iruka repeated, startled as if this hadn’t even occurred to him as an option.

“How do you even know where they are?” Anko could just imagine how pissed off some of them would be at being detected without any clue how. That had to have sent a few of the harder cases of overblown self-importance straight through the fucking roof (she heard from Hayate that Boar’s head almost exploded).

She’d have a good laugh at them, too, as soon as she found out which ones went crying to Mummy – that was, complaining to the Hokage. Oh, poor little boys. And girls.

“Um.” Iruka very deliberately stared into the depths of his glass. And then took a long, long pull. And then focused on swallowing it all without choking on it. “I just do. I – I didn’t know I wasn’t supposed to…?”

Anko waited for a moment, but it was obvious that this was all she would get out of him. Good on him. A secret advantage that was just his – she fully approved of not telling anybody who asked. “Heh, life’s never boring around you.”

“Thanks, I guess?”

“Listen, don’t worry about it. I know these guys – anybody who’s vetted to be on your case, I know them. Semi-formally even, most of them.” Biblically, too. “They’re good, and you can trust them. And if they come across as dicks, that’s because most of them are. It’s got nothing to do with you.”

“I just… let the frustration get to me. I realise it’s not personal…”

“Yeah, you got personal down pat.” She leered at him.

Iruka sighed. “Anko-san…”

She bumped his shoulder with hers. “Hey, no shit. I’m happy for you. I’d never have believed anybody could stand that guy for long enough to domesticate him – respect.” It had blown her mind when she found out. And then she had a good laugh at herself over some of their public confrontations she had witnessed – all animosity and snark. Such trolls. “Where’s your guard now? Can you tell? Even in the bar?”

Iruka glanced over his shoulder at the employees-only staircase leading down to the cellar.
Now that she knew what to look for, Anko found one of her colleagues crouched there. She sent Shikake to check them out, and the got back a rude response that amounted to ‘mind your own business or I’ll report you’. That had to be Lynx again.

Nobody else would threaten her with being reported.

“‘You’re here, good,’” Iruka heard as he stepped around the corner into the hallway.

He still had half an hour before he was supposed to present himself, so finding Tsunade-sama waiting for him was a bit of a shock. “Hokage-sama-”

“Are you hungover?” she demanded, scowling at him.

“No, Ma’am,” Iruka assured her. He had feared he might end up in that state when Anko actually physically dragged him out to a bar with her, but it took her less than half an hour after Lynx-san (Iruka’s guard for the night) rebuffed her advances (or possibly just refused to converse with her while he was on duty) to completely forget about their existence. Last Iruka saw her she was draped over an inviting couple on the other side of the room.

Iruka stayed long enough to finish his second beer and then headed home, certain that Anko wouldn’t even remember him until the next afternoon.

Sometimes he wished he had friends, but in between his friends turning out to be traitors and his own lack of time for maintaining social connections, maybe it was better this way. Who would want a friendship that included ANBU guards following them around everywhere? It was bad enough that Lynx-san, Tiger-san and Boar-san (and who knew who else) now intruded onto Iruka’s diligently guarded privacy.

At least the beer had helped him fall asleep.

“That’s good,” Tsunade-sama assured him, “because you’re hammering Hatake’s preliminary truce into something usable. The delegate from Suna is already in the room. Good luck-”

“Wait!” Iruka protested. He might have negotiated the Oto contract, but that had been with extensive coaching. She couldn’t really expect him to do this on his own… right?!

Tsunade-sama smirked, and gave him a chakra-reinforced push toward the ajar door of a regretfully familiar room. Iruka staggered forwards, caught himself on the doorframe, and glared back over his shoulder.

“We’ve localised their testicles, Umino – go directly for them. You don’t succeed by playing coy.”

Iruka had almost tasted his freedom already. He was prepared to beg to get out of this. “T-tsunade-sama…”

She stepped closer to him and clasped his shoulder in an uncomfortably tight hold. When she spoke, he felt the puffs of air on his neck. “This demure façade of yours has its uses, but you forget that I have seen you inside the conference hall. You are neither demure nor bothered with sensibilities.”

Iruka took a deep breath and tried to maintain his calm. “I still find talk of testicles best relegated to either a bedroom or a medic’s office, Hokage-sama. And, forgive me, but I hope never to meet you in either of those locations.”
The shadow clone chuckled. “There he is – Umino Iruka.” She pushed a folder into his chest, and him into the room. “Shigezane-san,” she announced loudly from the threshold, “this is Umino Iruka. He’s your primary point of contact in Konoha. Umino, you have my full confidence.”

The thing was, Iruka mused, watching the busty blonde woman stalk away down the corridor with an artful swish of fabric around her hips, she wasn’t very much like Tsunade-sama.

And the next thought logically followed: she wasn’t Tsunade-sama.
Debts to Pay

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Shigezane-san was nothing like either Tayuya-san or Kimimaro-san. The most obvious difference was clear right from the start: even though the shinobi was prepared to fight, he was already resigned to his defeat.

“Look,” the man said, drawing lines on the map hanging on the wall with his fingers. “These are the only merchant routes from the ports to the Capital. And here’s the Village Hidden in Sand—”

“They completely cut you off?” Iruka demanded, appalled at the treatment of Wind’s ninja.

Shigezane-san paused, and then just nodded. “Not like they didn’t have a reason. Sandaime-sama spent so much time focusing on… internal matters… that there were regular robberies along this routes. No one was willing to deliver anymore – not at the risk of their lives.”

Iruka scowled. “Was he taking a cut?”

It was rude, sure, but he could see the answer in his companion’s face already. Loyalty warred with indignation in his expression, because of course he couldn’t admit to an outsider that the Sandaime Kazekage had doomed their entire village over his personal interests.

“So you were starving?” he asked instead.

Shigezane-san just nodded. “We were never self-sustaining. You can’t be, in the middle of a desert. And then suddenly import ceased and… we knew it was a stupid plan.”

They knew it was going to fail, Iruka translated. They were desperate.

“Can you renew those routes, or will we have to establish trade from the North?” Iruka asked, stepping up to Shigezane-san’s shoulder so he could see the map in more detail. The Land of Rivers was in the way, but surely there was some way that Fire could supply Wind?

Could they do it without angering the Wind Daimyo, though? Iruka would have to consult with Hokage-sama before he went ahead with the wording of the treaty.

“Can we do both?” Shigezane-san asked, sounding young and tired and out of his depth.

It was revelatory for Iruka to be the one more confident in a diplomatic dialogue. His instincts drove him to educating this young man, even though he was probably not all that much younger than Iruka – if at all. But this was an enemy. Not quite six months ago he was one of the invaders.

Iruka’s protectiveness was misplaced here.

“Yes,” he decided nonetheless. “Let’s attempt to reestablish the two most viable existing routes to the sea, and the two most viable routes to the Land of Fire.” There had been modest trade between Wind and Fire since the alliance had been established, a generation ago, even though it had dwindled lately.


Iruka nodded. They were being very generous toward the Sand Village. Mostly in the hopes that
rejuvenating Sand would mean that they would not become a drain on Konoha’s resources in the future.

“May I ask…”

Iruka re-took his seat and made several markings in his notes. “Yes, Shigezane-san?”

“What has happened to Sand’s jinchuuriki?”

Iruka pretended to focus on his notes so the Suna nin would not see the flash of anger on his face. After he had crossed out all the points they had already addressed, Iruka impassively looked up and said: “I am not authorised to discuss this topic with you.”

Shigezane-san had no idea that Iruka had been co-leading Konoha during the detainment and disarmament of Suna’s invasion force, so he assumed that Iruka did not know about Sabaku no Gaara’s fate, and didn’t even try to argue.

Iruka placidly smiled and didn’t let on that he wanted to smash heads together for how that child had been treated. He shelved it away together with the satisfaction he felt when, by taking the boy hostage, he was rescuing him.

It was the brightest point of the entire conflict.

x

“There is mail for you,” Natsuko said softly as they switched off for shifts.

Sasuke nodded in confirmation, and continued rinsing the dishes. He was going to finish this and then take advantage of the free afternoon to get in some training – unless Jiraiya had some side-mission for him.

By now Sasuke must have sufficiently proven that he wouldn’t disappear one day without warning. He had never wanted to become a traitor – but at some point he had thought that he had no other recourse.

He glanced around the partition at Natsuko cleaning up tables after customers that have left.

Sasuke had found something in this dingy place that he had not had before. A measure of ease – of trust. Natsuko didn’t want anything from him except that he would do his work. And she helped him do it better, far beyond the call of duty, for no other reason than because she could.

“Add it to the pile,” Sasuke said when she came to the kitchen with an armload of used dishes.

“You’re off, Tomio-kun-”

“It’s fine,” he grumbled. What he meant was ‘let me help, isn’t that the point?’ They were so much more effective as a team than as individuals, and maybe Sasuke had to see it happen to believe it, but now he understood. This was how a team should work. Covering one another’s back was instinctive, and there was an odd pleasure in it – it wasn’t a hateful chore like it had been on Team Seven.

Natsuko shook her head at him, but let him do as he liked.

Sasuke came up to their room ten minutes later, and found the letter from Jiraiya on top of his folded-up bedroll.

‘Hey, Tomio-chan, I said I’d give you any reliable info, didn’t I?’ it read. ‘So sorry, but nobody’s
seen hide or hair of that guy. Big & Blue he runs with was spotted 'round Ame borders with an unidentified companion, so maybe? Hang in there and grab a chance to learn! Natsuko-san is full of tricks! My balls hurt just thinking about her.'

Sasuke reflexively threw the letter away from him. He should have expected something like this! If Jiraiya spewed more filth than actual information in his letters, Sasuke was going to get somebody to pre-read them and censor the horrifying parts.

He promised himself to incinerate the letter afterwards with a Goukakyuu; that gave him the energy to go and pick the paper up between two fingers. Just in case that sort of thing was contagious. He had to tilt his head to read the rest of it.

‘-kicking them that one time, and she did promise to nail them to a wall, so If you’re serious about ever reviving your clan, be good. Toodles, and enjoy your vacay! Your loving Uncle~’

Sasuke clung to Natsuko’s promise that she had never allowed the old lecher to touch her.

If Jiraiya ever tried, Sasuke would Goukakyuu his face off. Or, even better, his balls. That would solve the problem once and for all.

x

“You’re sure you don’t have any more chocolate, chūnin-chan?” senbon guy wheedled, pausing in his climb up the near-vertical rock wall.

This was a suicidal gambit, and if the enemy – whoever they even were? why the heck wouldn’t taichou tell them? was it so terrible? – caught up to them while they were mid-climb, it would take a miracle to get out of here alive.

On the other hand, they had a reasonable chance that the enemy would follow the decoys onwards along the river, walk into the traps the team had set there, and be unprepared for an attack from behind.

It was a gamble.

“Sure,” Naruto snarked. A stone came loose under his hand. He pulled it out of the cliff side and threw it down into the river. “I’ve got whole bunch of chocolate in my super-awesome waterproof, mud-proof storage seals.”

Senbon guy actually brightened and opened his mouth to beg before he realised that Naruto was being sarcastic.

Yeah, they were all tired. Even a month ago, Kakashi-taichou would not have okayed a plan with this big a chance of failure.

“You mean you don’t have waterproof storage seals?” asked Nishi-sensei. “Because that would be useful.”

Naruto carefully pulled himself up. Sticking with chakra was a perfectly fine technique – until your wall started crumbling on you. “Look, I know that my Dad was some super-genius with fuuinjutsu but I’m only-”

Senbon guy slipped and barely managed to right himself by clinging to the rock with the whole surface of his forearms before he took a header from fifty feet up. “Your what?!”
Naruto rolled his eyes and shamelessly abused the fact that to him, parents were mostly an abstract concept. “Dad. It’s the guy that has sex with your Mum to make you-”

Senbon guy freed one arm, clapped his palm over his left ear and recited the Shinobi Code in reverse.

“...but I guess you know the mechanics,” Naruto continued over him, “and we’re back to pretending that I’m not his carbon-copy with a little Uzumaki thrown in. I mean, you’d have a leg to stand on, maybe, if I was a redhead like Mum, but, honestly?!” Naruto pointed at his face. Most people weren’t trained to watch and think at the same time, but elite ninja that had actually worked with his Dad couldn’t be honestly pretending that the family resemblance wasn’t completely obvious?

“What the fuck...?” muttered Nishi-sensei. “No, seriously, what the fuck did I just hear-”

“Uh... taichou?” senbon guy asked helplessly.

Right. S-rank village secrets being revealed. ANBU generally didn’t like that.

“Ninken,” Kakashi explained exhaustively from high above them, where he was crouching and leaning down over the edge of the ledge. “Shut up and climb.”

x

Guruko’s bark cut off suddenly, and Iruka spun just in time to deflect three senbon with his kunai.

He body-flickered across the street and stabbed the neck of the ninja Guruko and Bisuke were fighting. The ninja mostly dodged, but Guruko used the moment of distraction to take a bite out of his inner thigh.

The nin looked down and let Iruka’s second stab connect.

There was no time to wonder why the already dying enemy committed suicide by Iruka’s hand. Bisuke was already scouting the nearest alley – no go, Iruka just had to glance upwards at the laundry drying on the lines between the houses, and see that stepping there would be certain death.

He snagged Bisuke by the vest and followed Guruko under the cover of the ice cream shop’s sunroof. The shop was already closed, but it wasn’t so late yet; the sun was just setting. There were people in the street-

Civilians, all of them. They had not even noticed that anything had happened.

“The ANBU?” Bisuke growled quietly.

Iruka listened. He heard a cacophony of heartbeats, a multitude of sandals clattering on the roofs, human voices everywhere around. “I don’t know!”

“Backup!” Guruko snapped at Bisuke.

Bisuke vanished.

Iruka combined a Henge and a Kakuremino to blend with the shutters covering the front of the ice cream shop as best as he could. It wouldn’t fool a jounin, he was sure, but at least the civilians would not notice him acting oddly and attract attention to him.

His eyes remained trained on the stores and restaurants opposite, while his ears strained for any sign of attack from above or from the sides.
There was a large swell of chakra somewhere overhead; Iruka tensed with his kunai at the ready; Guruko crouched-

A body fell from above and landed face-down on the street. It was covered in long, deep cuts and bleeding heavily.

*This* the civilians noticed. It wasn’t exactly a regular occasion, but they were inured enough to ninja that only a couple of out-of-towners screamed, and everyone else hurried away or took shelter in the nearest stores.

Within seconds the street was empty.

“*Iruka?!*” Bisuke called out.

It could be a trick.

Guruko barked.

The responding bark must have been reassuring, because Guruko walked forwards into the street and stood still. Bisuke bounded over to him and sniffed at him.

“What the hell was that?” demanded Asuma-sensei, jumping to street level. His trench knives were covered in blood.

*That,* Iruka mused, was exactly what Sandaime-sama had been worried about. What Sandaime-sama had tried to warn them about; what he had tried to prevent.

*A Hokage candidate controlled through a chunin-level hostage,* Kakashi had quoted Jiraiya’s explanation. At that time it seemed so terribly intrusive, and unfair. Now Iruka couldn’t help but wonder how many times Sandaime-sama’s foresight and meddling had saved his life.

“Treason,” Kurenai-sensei summed all that up in a single word. She, too, jumped down from the roof. “Are you wounded, Umino-sensei?”

“I’m fine,” Iruka assured her. He had let his kunai down, but wasn’t yet ready to put it away. His heart was still pounding, and he couldn’t quite believe he was safe. “Not so sure about my ANBU guard. Boar-san!” He walked out into the middle of the street despite the ninken’s protests. “Boar-san!”

Two shinobi in ANBU uniforms body-flickered in, one supporting the other. The wounded one was Boar-san.

Iruka’s eyes welled with relief.

“We held up the other prong of the attack,” reported the unfamiliar ANBU – Jackal, perhaps, guessing from the stylisation of his mask.

Boar lowered his head. “I failed my mission, Umino-sama-”

“It was salvaged by your comrades,” Iruka assured him.

“Thank you, Sarutobi-san, Yuuhi-san,” Boar said between wet coughs. “I shall requisition another team-”

“Hospital,” Iruka ordered.
If Boar-san drowned in his own blood, Iruka would feel the death on his conscience for the rest of his life.

“I’ve got another dead ANBU that was not on the books,” Tsunade snapped. “Where the fuck are these cockroaches hidden?”

She poured another cup of sake. Drank it. Poured yet another. Drank that, too.

“I’m doing what I can,” her Shadow’s shadow clone announced in her own voice. “If you want to avoid a civil war, there is no immediate solution.”

Tsunade cursed, downed the rest of the sake straight from the bottle, and hurried to the Hospital.

Her Shadow’s clone followed.

It was far from the first time Anko – or, rather, the ANBU Dove – attended a briefing in a hospital room, but it was still a trip to watch her Hokage turn on the iryounin in her and actively work on healing Boar while the personnel gathered. Boar, for his part, was sitting on a hospital bed, half-naked, with only a bandana and a mask to disguise his identity.

Moot point – Anko had licked some of the scars she was seeing on display. It took her fifteen seconds to put a face to them (she needed so long because of the sheer number of torsos she had licked).

“A guard rotation doesn’t suffice anymore. You – with all due respect, Hokage-sama, you are quite well-versed in defending yourself from assassination attempts, and you coordinate with your guards well. Umino-sama is not a civilian, but by ANBU standards he might as well be.”

Anko disagreed with him there – Iruka was rolling ball of trouble, and he could act as a devastating support for some frontline fighters, if the frontline fighters unbent enough to work with him.

On the other hand, ANBU by definition did not work with daylighters.

So what they had here was a situation that required some rule-breaking, and Boar in particular wasn’t any good at rule-breaking. The less said about Lynx on that subject the better – although Lynx had at least been inured to Kakashi, so he tolerated Iruka’s brand of contrary independence with a lot less obvious frustration.

It begged the question whether Boar was the right person to lead this mission, regardless of his glowing record of past protection details.

The guy pretty much echoed Anko’s doubts by saying: “I would prefer to have Dragonfly for the unit-”

“What’s the holdup?” asked Tsunade-sama, visibly displeased with how this was going.

“Dragonfly is listed as unavailable, Hokage-sama, but there is no mission code reference.”

“Dragonfly is on a daylight mission, Boar,” said Falcon. “You can have Jackal, with the proviso that Dragonfly will be rotated onto your team once he’s available. And Tiger should be back by next week.”
“What is the projected length of the mission?”

“Indefinite,” snapped Tsunade-sama’s shadow clone. “Just because Umino will be done with the negotiations within a week doesn’t mean you can drop guard. I want him alive for future summits.”

“Hatake-”

“May be habitually hypervigilant,” Tsunade-sama cut in, exhibiting first signs of genuine annoyance, “but is just as entitled to time off as any shinobi. Yes, he’s the second to last line of defence when he’s at home.” She pursed her mouth. “Notice how I said ‘home’?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Boar replied, strained. He turned to Falcon. “If I may-?”

“Yes?”

“Hatake is personally familiar with Umino-sama, and knows ANBU procedures. I would like to request him to teach Umino-sama how to let his guard operate optimally. And maybe suggest the right operatives for this mission.” Because, Anko translated, Boar was a fucking professional, and just because he didn’t particularly like the man he was protecting didn’t mean he wouldn’t have died in Iruka’s defence without giving it a second thought.

And he definitely wouldn’t have foisted off his duty on Kakashi, so the Godaime’s assumption there had stung.

Anko grimaced.

Asuma’s debriefing with the ANBU Falcon had been short and curt, and entirely one-sided.

He told the man he had been on a date with his girlfriend, when one of Kakashi’s dogs appeared out of nowhere to request backup. So Asuma and Kurenai went and killed someone who appeared at first glance to be an ANBU, but who had not hesitated to attack them.

Asuma didn’t even find out whom exactly he had killed today, or how many others there were, or why those people tried to kill Umino. He wondered if it was because he had never been in ANBU – if they considered him an outsider to the point that they didn’t trust him.

Or if it was Umino specifically they didn’t trust him with.

He sucked in another lungful of nicotine, and let it out bit by bit in small blue-grey puffs.

Kurenai came out to the balcony and leaned against the railing next to him. “Is it better now?”

He shrugged. “I suppose. I wanted to see what was so special about that man.” If he had been talking to anyone else, he would have stopped there. But Kurenai – well, Kurenai was prickly, and she sometimes did things that came off as self-absorbed or overdramatic (like slamming her door into his face whenever she decided to feel offended by some completely innocuous remark), but Asuma knew where all that was coming from.

He doubted he would have had the patience to date someone like Kurenai without the understanding; actions and words that otherwise would have been annoying often made him feel melancholy instead, put into perspective.

She had had bad luck with her own jounin sensei. The man had focused on his male students and
dismissed Kurenai out of hand as a kunoichi. There had, apparently, been allusions to her being only
good for one type of mission and, well, given the way she had been brought up Kurenai took that as
badly as a civilian girl would take being repeatedly called a whore. The hazing made her hard
enough that she had risen to a rank she might not have attained otherwise, but it also made her brittle.
Most of those wounds remained unhealed. Sometimes it took was Asuma calling her beautiful –
she heard ‘weak’ and ‘second-class’ and ‘good only for sex’.

So Asuma tried to show a little of his own unhealed wounds to equalise their relationship. “I wanted
to know why Dad would have spent so much time with him when he couldn’t have spared five
minutes for me when I was a teen. No matter how hard I busted my arse.” And he had busted it very
hard, trying to step out of the Sandaime Hokage’s shadow. Not that he’d ever manage that.

Kurenai took a moment to reflect upon this. Notably, she did not mention that it made Asuma sound
exceptionally juvenile and petty. “And? What is the verdict?”

Asuma exhaled a cloud of smoke that briefly obscured the stars. He felt relaxed; it had been a long
time ago and maybe, just maybe, he was almost ready to let go of this resentment. “I guess Dad
always knew I wasn’t interested in administration. He had his sights set on Kakashi as his successor
already back then, but trying to make Kakashi do something he doesn’t want to do is like catching
electricity in your bare hand.”

“It won’t work, and you get burnt?” Kurenai translated, amused.

Asuma nodded. “So he taught all that boring knowhow to Kakashi’s tagalong instead. Six of this.”

“Were you jealous of the boy doomed to be the most stressed paperwork ninja in the village?”

A lot of Asuma’s poking at Umino Iruka had to do with the sudden, surprising reveal (if only to a
limited audience so far) of his relationship with Kakashi. Asuma was used to knowing such things –
he had an eye for detail and for patterns, and a knack for extrapolation. It was how he had made
jounin in the first place. To know that he had missed a romantic relationship between one of his
closer colleagues and one of the best-known chuunin in Konoha, for months since his return to
Konoha, rankled.

It ate at him. And the newly revealed couple promptly pissed him off by messing with both his and
Kurenai’s teams, and… well, Asuma had not thought of his old grudge for a long time until the new
grudge stirred those memories.

He sighed and buried his face in Kurenai’s hair (it smelled like the fruity shampoo she preferred).
“When you put it like that…”

Kurenai shrugged. “I was warned that most men do not age much past thirteen. It could have been
worse.” She patted his hand, then laced their fingers together – and then she pulled him inside.

Genma asked for the last watch, and got it. The night was pitch black, not even a hint of the stars.
Mist was slowly rising from the ravine beneath as the dawn neared; he listened to the regular
breathing of his sleeping teammates, tried to sense for human chakra, and waited for a sign of
anything from below.

There was still nothing.

He thought this whole gambit was fucking stupid to attempt with two chuunin. If they were an
ANBU team – alright, he could maybe see it working. Except that they’d never be allowed to try,
but that was a whole other point.

Nishi was fine – a perfectly competent, professional shinobi – but he was in no way prepared for three *fucking* consecutive months in wilderness. Worse yet, he couldn’t deal with open combat. It had become painfully obvious that he was support-only.

And Naruto… Don’t get Genma started on Naruto. He thought the kid was a fresh chuunin, and in some ways he clearly was, but in others… and not the obvious ones, either, because there had not been a peep from the bijuu… Naruto was like Anko’s second coming, only without the sexual aggressiveness.

And he knew… who his Father was.

Every time the kid even looked at Genma it felt like a silent accusation. *Where were you, Genma?*

He was seriously wigging out.

Genma could mostly keep up the nonchalant poise, but he had no idea how to really deal with the kid.

He just hoped they weren’t going to get him killed here.

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**Chapter End Notes**

Hey, everybody. I'm going to be travelling for a while, and there is a very good chance that updates won't happen while I'm gone. If that's the case, the next chapter should be up in two weeks. Cheers,

Brynn
Iruka weighed the decision until it was almost time for Shigezane-san to arrive. When his eyes continued to stubbornly refuse to focus, he surrendered to the inevitable and downed a soldier pill.

He was feeling awful. He had managed to sleep for less than three hours before he had woken up from a nightmare…

-he couldn’t do it. He couldn’t do it. He couldn’t, he couldn’t, he couldn’t-

Couldn’t he, though?

He stared from the rooftop at the chakra-strung colourful rendition of the Clan House, of the street and the other houses, and watched the chakra sources mill around. A strategy formed in his head without his conscious decision to start planning. He just knew – wait until half past three, start off with an area genjutsu here, then another there, the sensor first, then that person, then those, then form a shadow clone and continue down both sides of the street at once-

Unless someone managed a chakra pulse that would affect a wider area than their own house, he could do it.

He swallowed and coughed; his throat was parched.

These eyes – he had never wanted them. But they saw, he saw, and now he could.

So now he had to decide if he would.

But was there even a decision when the thing that mattered most hung in the balance?

His little brother. His little brother had to live. So he…

He.

He was.

He was going to do it-

…and then it took Iruka half the night until he dared close his eyes again. By that time the dawn was rising pale blue above the rooftops. His alarm clock roused him like a herald of doom far too soon afterwards.

It wasn’t even his own nightmare. Kami-sama damn all doujutsu! That was one memory he would have been happier without.

“…and I don’t expect Jiraiya to arrive today because that would just be convenient,” Hokage-sama’s voice came from the corridor, and a moment later she entered, followed closely by Shizune-san, who was carrying a folder that Iruka would just bet was the Hospital’s budget proposal.

He was so glad that was not his responsibility anymore.

“Do you expect he’ll have any news that will affect Iruka-san’s work?” Shizune-san cast a quick smile and nod in Iruka’s direction.

He nodded back.
Her smile was replaced with a frown.

“Ano, Iruka-san, are you-”

“No,” Tsunade-sama refuted without a shred of doubt. “He’s sent ahead a broad overview of what he’s got, and it looks like we might have to focus on Wave, but, Umino, you can finish this with what you’ve got. How’s the schedule looking?”

Shigezane-san was making a few token protests whenever Iruka brought up anything truly outrageous – which he had been taught to do, in the interest of maintaining a stronger bargaining position – but as days passed it was becoming harder to even try that gambit, because Shigezane-san was just… folding. He was defeated already, and too aware that he had no leverage whatsoever.

He had come here as a beggar, and it was in Iruka’s power to entirely annihilate his people. Or, alternatively, save them.

“Iruka-san,” Shizune-san spoke, “are you feeling unwell-?”

“Sabaku no Gaara… is he doing better?” Iruka asked at almost the same time. He regretted the rudeness, but the answer to his question suddenly seemed terribly important to him.

Shigezane-san had asked – once, he had dared ask once, and Iruka had shut him down – and ever since that time the topic occasionally reoccurred to Iruka. He wanted to believe that the boy was well, with an improved seal and among people who wished him no harm… but how was he doing really?

Shizune-san’s face twisted in pain, while Tsunade-sama sighed.

“He’s healthy and aware, but… uncommunicative,” Hokage-sama admitted.

Iruka supposed that was the best he could hope for.

“He likes Tonton,” Shizune-san offered in a desperately cheerful tone. “I mean, he hasn’t actually said so, but he reacts positively, and Tonton is so far the only living being Gaara-kun has been willing to touch.”

Tsunade-sama squeezed Iruka’s shoulder, so hard that it definitely left a bruise despite the armour he was wearing. “Don’t borrow trouble, kid. You’ve got one day, maybe two on the outside, to finish this, and then you’re home free.”

Iruka nodded. Home free. No more politics. No more negotiations. No more assassinations. Just the Academy, and teaching, and kids who were walking headaches but who filled his life with hope and joy and cheer.

“Yes, Ma’am,” he replied, mustering a smile.

Shizune-san seemed reluctant to leave, worried that Iruka was actually sick rather than just tired, but she eventually let Tsunade-sama drag her away.

They passed Shigezane-san at the door, frightening him – unintentionally, as far as Iruka could tell – into paleness and utter submission.

It was not going to take much longer now.
Naruto scowled at the dwindling number of blank pages. The past few days had been so boring, and nobody knew how long they’d remain stuck here, and he was running out of supplies for fuuinjutsu practice. What was he going to do then?

Go cuckoo, probably-

There was a flash, a clack and a tearing noise.

“Oi, let go!”

One of his goat-clones had bit down onto the page with the seal Naruto just finished drawing and pulled. The shadow clone must have come to report, but it stayed in goat form instead of transforming into human shape and complaining about the boredom, or just bursting itself.

Yeah, Naruto’s clones kept killing themselves out of boredom. It was annoying. Several times a day Naruto would get days’ worth of memories of nothing except the occasional squirrel-chase.

It sucked.

“C’mon,” he whinged, tugging onto the paper, “I know you’re not really a goat. Whatcha gonna do with it anyway? The seal’s messed up from where you ripped out the page! It’s not even chakra paper!” Naruto was just trying to get the lines and the designs right for some basic seals – he wasn’t going to waste chakra paper on that.

He’d buy proper paper once he knew he could properly use it. For now he was filling in the plain notebook he had liberated from Iruka-sensei’s office supplies at the Academy. He had taken it ages ago, and meant to use it to design some traps, only it turned out that he was a lot better at designing traps when he could build them.

Just drawing stuff and trying to imagine how it’d work in reality was impossible. Naruto’s brain didn’t work that way.

“Be-heh!” insisted the goat clone, digging in its feet and pulling.

Naruto let go of the paper.

The goat flopped over onto the bed of dry needles, and let out an annoyed bleat.

“Whatever,” Naruto grumbled back. “Keep that if you want it. Just don’t leave it lying around, or Dog-sensei will skin me-”

Of course, the goat was still Naruto, so it reacted by head-butting Naruto in the thigh.

“Yeow! What was that for?! I gave you what… you… wanted…” Naruto trailed off, looking down, where his clone’s head was pinning the seal to Naruto’s thigh.

Well, that was an idea. Obviously, Naruto wasn’t going to draw anything on himself – not yet, not while he was practicing, but practice was one of the things shadow clones were awesome at, and Jiraiya’s seal had worked great on them, so.

Who was Naruto to reject willing subjects? Enthusiastic subjects?

“He’s calmed down,” Jiraiya commented, falling into a chair with all the grace of a dying hog. “I expected to find him still screaming, but he’s just lying in the bed, staring into darkness and on the
whole doing a good impression of catalepsy.”

Tsunade was very glad that she had had the foresight to switch with her Shadow as soon as she found out about Jiraiya crossing the gates. She hadn’t expected him this soon; even though she needed his information urgently, she had estimated at least another day of ‘travel’.

He must have been in the vicinity. Possibly checking on the ‘runaway’ Uchiha, before he checked on Sabaku.

“Don’t start assuming responsibility for yet another tragedy you had nothing to do with, idiot,” Tsunade grumbled, dismissing her ANBU.

They left reluctantly even though, unlike Umino, Tsunade was perfectly capable of protecting herself. She would not have survived her first day back in Konoha if she hadn’t been.

And she was pretty certain that those assassins after her then and these assassins after Umino now were sent by the same group. Which, it was looking increasingly likely, either had close ties to the Council, or was the actual kami-damned Council.

She hoped Hiruzen-sensei’s tea was cold and his porridge very bland.

And how did the mummies have the kind of inexhaustible human resources? Were they importing foreign ninja? Because they weren’t growing them in Orochimaru’s abandoned laboratory (yes, she had checked).

“Why the hell does this have to keep happening, hime?” Jiraiya’s old face turned to her, with the pained eyes and the bitter twist to his mouth. “I can’t walk two miles without stumbling over another poor kid that somebody used as their own dishrag.”

Was it them? Tsunade thought it was Sensei’s generation. Or maybe Jii-san’s. Or maybe even the one before them. Maybe they were still living the aftershocks of the Clan Wars.

“We generate all this fecal matter and expect babies to wipe up after us,” Jiraiya muttered.

Oh kami, this was going to be another Ame all over again.

“And I can’t help him. I’ve got work outside the village that won’t wait. I’d take him on a training trip, but he can’t leave Konoha proper.”

Tsunade poured a cup of sake and handed it over. Jiraiya downed it and extended his hand, wordlessly asking for another shot. He looked old and angry – not quite defeated, but not far from it either. She admired him for that, if nothing else.

She herself had accepted defeat and folded a long time ago. Even now she was being propped up by others – Naruto and Shizune in small ways. In bigger ones by her Shadow. And Jiraiya did his own part, too; sometimes watching him was like looking into a mirror and definitely not liking what she was seeing, and that helped her not be like him. Or be as little like him as possible.

Other times – well, she wasn’t going to be the weakest link, and she could have found a worse source of motivation than pride.

x

“I’m done,” Tsunade-sama announced, capping her pen and rising from her desk. She scowled at Asuma and Shikaku. “You’ve been hovering for the past twenty minutes – spit it out so we can all
Asuma had been hoping to get a kid, but he could already tell that he wasn’t going to get one today. Dealing with an incomplete genin team consisting of a worried Chouji and an increasingly unstable Ino was indescribably frustrating.

That girl needed help, but Asuma couldn’t even convince her to share the source of the problem. He just knew that it, against all expectations, was not Uchiha’s desertion. He was about ready to hunt down Shikamaru and beg for him to figure out some solution.

He hoped Shikaku could help him with that endeavor once they were done here.

“Why Umino?” Shikaku asked directly.

Iruka had become a funny, misplaced character – a little chuunin playing dress up in a facsimile of ANBU armour. He walked around the village with an ANBU guard, annoyed at everything, and so very obviously far from qualified for a leadership position that everybody Asuma had talked to assumed he was a red herring.

Except that Umino actually had been put in a position of power.

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Except that Umino actually had been put in a position of power.

“Why don’t you tell me, Nara,” snapped Tsunade-sama’s shadow clone. It was a clear taunt – ‘you’re supposed to be the genius, Jounin Commander’.

Shikaku scratched at his beard. “It is a work he and Kakashi started, admittedly. But letting him finish it just because he feels the obligation is a strategically unsound decision.”

“It would be,” Tsunade-sama replied dismissively. “Little Sarutobi? Care to venture an opinion?”

Asuma didn’t care to, a little too worried that his answer might get back to Umino. He also didn’t care for the form of address, but he guessed that if anyone a head smaller than himself could call him ‘little’, it was the damn Kage. “I’ve been out of the village for a decade, Ma’am. I know next to nothing-”

“Exactly,” she cut him off. “Nara, how long have I been out of the village?”

“Years… decades?” Nara amended, trying to remember. It definitely would have been for most of his career (Asuma himself had become genin after she was already gone).

Both the Hokage and her shadow clone snorted.

“Close enough,” said the clone. “And Jiraiya’s been gone nearly as long. We have amassed a great amount of knowledge about the international politics and economy. But we know jack shit about Konoha.” She crossed her arms under her bust (Asuma pointedly looked at the seal on her forehead, thinking fervently about Kurenai) and put Asuma’s recent conclusion into words: “Umino doesn’t realise it, but he knows the laws, the policies, the procedures, the internal structure and even most people in key positions. Hiruzen-sensei stuffed his head full of all that shit. I am advising him on what we can get out of Suna, and how to go about making them give it – but he’s the one who can decide what we want, and how to facilitate getting it.”

“Umino Iruka?” Nara said pensively. “Figures.” Whatever the hell that was supposed to mean.

Shikamaru looked from his Dad to his former sensei to his bowl of rice. He clacked his chopsticks
together, and then picked up another mouthful.

Asuma-sensei sighed.

Shikamaru chewed. Slowly. Then he swallowed. He clacked his chopsticks together again.

There was a slight rise of KI in the room.

Hm. He guessed in three more mouthfuls Asuma-sensei would break.

Unfortunately, his Dad knew that too, so in two more mouthfuls he would call Shikamaru on it.

It was a conspiracy.

Pain in the arse.

He swallowed the next mouthful and, after a brief hesitation, said: “Fine. I’ll talk to her.” He laid the chopsticks across the unfinished bowl and walked away.

He could hear his Dad sigh and Asuma-sensei mutter something distinctly vulgar under his breath, but, honestly – what did they expect?

x

“No change,” senbon guy reported, returning from patrol. “The traps are still primed, but most will have to be reset within the next two days.”

Naruto, with the integrated memories of a couple of his goat-clones, could have told him as much. “Tomorrow,” he corrected.

None of his teammates looked in his direction.

But Naruto knew that Dog listened to everything, so he wasn’t really worried.

x

Sasuke gritted his teeth against the pain, and stood up again. Losing to a bird in a taijutsu spar was humiliating-

“Better,” Asuka decided, despite Sasuke’s hopeless defeat.

Susuke blinked in surprise.

Asuka clucked her beak at him. “You thought you’d catch up to me that fast?”

Sasuke did. He was beginning to see his folly. Even if training with Natsuko helped him improve by leaps and bounds, he was still far from the level of the truly dangerous shinobi, be they human or otherwise.

And Asuka was definitely one of the dangerous ones.

Natsuko, too, belonged among them. As became apparent when she melted out of the shadows after Sasuke had accepted his defeat, and easily greeted Asuka.

Her eyes quickly shifted from Asuka to Sasuke’s discarded shirt lying in the grass. Upon a closer look, there was a pelican chick sitting on top of the wad of fabric.
“New addition?” Natsuko inquired, leaning to the side to get a closer look.

Sasuke thought he had heard that chirp somewhere before. He was surprised the thing had survived this long – but maybe it really wanted to, and just needed someone to give it the means. On the other hand, it was clearly asking for the mercy of death by daring to soil Sasuke’s shirt.

“This is Shou,” said Asuka, tugging on the fabric a little to expose the pale grey fluffball. She tried to not sound proud, but failed.

“He looks better with his clothes on,” Sasuke remarked pithily.

Asuka pointedly glared at his bare midriff. “Who doesn’t?”

Natsuko crouched down and solemnly surveyed the ugly little creature without making an attempt to touch it. The corner of her mouth quirked up. “A future ninja, without a doubt.”

Sasuke’s heart skipped a beat.

“Tch.”

“Asuma told my Dad to tell me to tell you to… stop being angry, I guess?” Shikamaru announced, shuffling into Ino’s apartment. He slid the door shut, tilted to the side, and let gravity drag him down onto the sofa.

His body thumped into and bounced on the mattress. He remained stationary, although chances were that he hadn’t even winded himself.

“Asuma and your Dad should tell my Dad to stop being a douche and apologise,” Ino replied from her armchair, unmoved by this production. She had seen it often enough lately that it barely registered anymore.

Shikamaru wasn’t nearly as bad an occasional roommate as she had feared he’d be.

“Shooting the messenger,” he muttered into the sofa cushion. After a moment he rolled over, grunting with the effort. “Be glad I was harbouring you.”

“Now I’m harbouring you. That’s appreciative enough.”

“Will you really stop talking to your Dad over Uchiha?”

Ino scoffed. Genius he might have been, but how often did he miss the things that were right in front of his face?

She loved her Dad, but he refused to listen to her, disregarded her input, belittled her ability to interpret information, point-blank accused her of fabricating events that would validate her rhetoric, and then ignored her pleading, all in pursuit of some fixed idea of his own. Sure, his driving force was protectiveness of Ino, but he treated her like some uninformed, incapable civilian little girl – even actual civilians weren’t as feckless as her Dad implied Ino was.

When all Ino ever really wanted to be was a strong kunoichi. Strong like her Dad, with other shinobi looking up to her, respecting her.

But how could she be that, if her own Dad thought she was that useless?

“Have you ever thought about who you wanted to be?” she counter-questioned.
Shikamaru made a nonverbal, vaguely interrogative sound.

“Not just a vision of life that would require the least effort from you – but something that you might actually enjoy. Something that might make the effort you do put in worth it.”

Shikamaru opened his eyes. Both of them. His forehead scrunched up. “Is there anything like that?”

Ino shrugged. “The other option is that the very idea of happiness and fulfillment is a mass delusion, and if that’s true we might as well put the whole world under a mass genjutsu and out of its misery.”

Shikamaru’s frown deepened. He raised his hands and folded them into a thinking seal on top of his chest. “Troublesome…”

Tsunade-hime was still dealing with the Oto mess (which was honestly a lot smaller than Jiraiya had expected, as if all those nukenin Orochimaru collected were happy to just stay at home and cool their heels) and the Suna mess (kami, did Jiraiya not envy her that windy, sandy clusterfuck), and he had now dumped the brewing Nami mess into her lap.

He couldn’t put Ame on her, too. No, it was better to keep it to himself for the time being – and if anything happened to him, Natsuko-san had all the intelligence, and knew to bring it to Konoha. Naruto and Tomio would vouch for her. After all, she was the one who had brought him most of what he knew.

Now, what Jiraiya needed was his teacher’s insight.

“You look tired,” Hiruzen-sensei said, concerned, when Jiraiya finally found him, sitting on a little bench in one of the nooks of the Sarutobi gardens. “Is Tsunade dragging you all over the place again?”

Jiraiya shrugged and filched some tobacco from him (sensei let him, and even gave him a mocking little smile – just like he used to when Jiraiya was fifteen). “Eh, it’s not like I mind going places and meeting people.” Meeting beautiful women, especially, even if they always insisted on emptying out his pockets. Oh, but the inspiration he got out of it! “I think the next book is almost ready. Been a while since I published the last one.”

“Oh…” Sensei frowned in concentration. “Is it a continuation of that Naruto story? I liked that one.”

“Huh?” Jiraiya had mostly forgotten about *The Tale of the Utterly Gutsy Shinobi*. And he preferred it that way. “No, sensei. It’s going to be another *Icha Icha*. You’ll like it.”

“Ah. I’m… sure I will.”

Jiraiya’s old teacher was an unrepentant lecher. “You said you liked the last one.”

“Did I?” Hiruzen-sensei puffed on his pipe. It was clear that he did not remember what Jiraiya was talking about. “I must have, then.”

Jiraiya couldn’t quite believe his eyes. He had spoken to Hiruzen-sensei just months ago. Three months. This man was a smiling, absent shadow of the one from three months ago.

He would have been certain that there this was the result of an attack – genjutsu or poison, or even an unlucky blow to the head – but Hime said it wasn’t. She had warned him; he thought she was exaggerating. More fool, he.
When did Tsunade ever blow anything out of proportion? Right. Only when she caught Jiraiya peeping. It was research. Re-search.

Hime just did not understand art.

The world was fortunate that Jiraiya was a great martyr, willing to endure much pain and suffering to be able to deliver the most titillating, the juiciest, the bounciest and squishiest imagery to his very discerning (and very happy!) audience.

“Say, Jiraiya… you haven’t heard from Orochimaru lately? I can’t get that boy to visit me.”

Jiraiya clenched his fists out of Hiruzen-sensei’s sight and pasted a sickly smile over the bubbling anger he felt. “No, sorry, sensei.” May the bastard burn in hell.

The old man sighed wistfully. “Yes, yes. I know what he’s like. All about his experiments, huh?”

Jiraiya wondered how short he could cut this visit without adding to the old man’s heartbreak.

Hime really did understate how far away from the present Sensei was already gone.

x

“I got it,” Naruto blurted. Oops. He hadn’t meant to say that out loud.

They were still watching the very empty path in the ravine, but at this rate he thought they’d kill some unsuspecting innocent traveler before any real enemy even showed up, and then he started another round of trying to figure out who the enemy was supposed to be, and then it just clicked, and he was so surprised he had just blurted it out.

His three teammates stared at him.

“Oh, uh… I got it?” He tried to smile, but he didn’t very much feel like smiling.

“Remembered where you left your stealth?” senbon guy suggested dryly.

Naruto stuck out his tongue, but didn’t otherwise bother with arguing with the guy. By now he was used to the sort of comradeship that never could be a real friendship, and who even said that a team had to be like a family?

It was fine. Naruto and senbon guy were cool.

“It’s Konoha, isn’t it?” Naruto squinted at Dog, hoping for an eye-twitch or something that would confirm that he was on the right path. “We’re waiting for Konoha.”

That was why Bisuke had brought a letter from Iruka-sensei instead of it coming by bird like official missives did. That was why they were still stuck out here, drawing attention by being a high-profile team on a widely discussed peace-keeping mission.

They had dealt with the Sound saboteurs and the Sand saboteurs, but they were still waiting for the saboteurs from their own village.

And Dog was worried, because if they weren’t coming yet, then what were they doing, and where, and was Iruka-sensei safe?
“Naruto.”

Naruto woke up silently, like Rikku had trained him to, and blinked into the darkness. Senbon guy had the third watch, and he was watching, except that he was watching Rikku rather than the forest.

The wild goat clones were all fine, and none reported anything more worrying than a hungry lynx. Still, Naruto recognised that predatory crouch, and knew that something was going on. Rikku was never wrong about these things.

He sniffed the air. There was nothing that seemed off. Four team members, three ninen, remnants of a little campfire, food stores, the thicket they used as a toilet – urgh – and beyond it the woods, smelling the same as yesterday.

“Hm?” inquired Kakashi-taichou, suddenly awake, too.

Naruto frowned, fastened his cat claws and picked up a kunai in his right hand.

Senbon guy woke Nishi-sensei.

Akino and Uuhei took sentinel positions, deferring to Rikku.

They waited.

Kakashi was hit with a hail of kunai. He was dead on the spot-

- and Naruto’s arm was nicked while he scampered up the trunk of a pine tree, though he couldn’t go too far, because the branches were so thick. He dropped down again, while Rikku, Akino and Uuhei managed to take several glancing bites of someone invisible.

“Chakra pulse,” whisper-ordered a voice from the dark.

Naruto trusted Dog to cover his back, focused, and pulsed his chakra.

Seven ANBU-like ninja flickered into sight.

Senbon guy had one dead a split second later. The ninen took down another. One more fell to Kakashi.

Naruto dodged a buzzing swarm of insects and regretted that he didn’t know any fire techniques. They would be useful now.

“Goats,” Rikku growled an instant before Naruto heard the stampede.

“Up!” he snapped. Get them up!” He was in the branches and trying to get higher while not being skewered. He released another pulse of chakra, because he couldn’t see any of the alive enemy anymore, but there was just darkness beneath him.

Rikku, Akino and Uuhei managed to get Nishi-sensei off the ground; Kakashi and senbon guy had disappeared, too.
“Exploding Goat Attack!” Naruto yelled when the first spark of orange flame appeared, and then snapped his eyes shut.

The blaze was searing even through his eyelids. It was loud, and really, really hot, and he couldn’t breathe. Stuff splattered against his back.

And then it was very quiet.

“What the fuck, Uzumaki?!”

Naruto kept blinking afterimages while he slowly climbed down to the ground. The tree was kinda threatening to break on him. Its needles were mostly gone. And, huh, there was a clearing now. Neat.

Except, you know, not really neat.

It was dark, but now he smelled a lot of blood. A lot. Also barbecue. Ew.

“They’re just Kage Bunshin kage-henged into goats, except I drew some seals on them,” Naruto explained, mentally saying goodbye to Neji Seventeen through Thirty-one. They had been very brave and self-sacrificing. “Hey, it worked!”

“…Mama…”

“This – This! This is why Uzushio was wiped out!” hissed Nishi-sensei, after he finished barfing into the shrubbery. He was shaking and leaning onto the first surviving tree. “A whole village of ninja like this! Can you even imagine? The world wouldn’t have lasted this long!”

Something inside Naruto’s chest clenched and sent a spike of pain throughout his body. He thought he was poisoned – but, no, that was just an emotion.

That was the way it felt when somebody, out of blue, told you that people like you deserved to die.

Why?

Because they were clever?

Because they could do cool stuff?

“You’re just jealous of my awesome new technique!” Naruto shouted, tasting blood in his mouth. He thought Nishi-sensei wasn’t like that. “Behold the might of the Multiple Exploding Goats Jutsu!” He made a sweeping gesture toward the rough circle of wood chips, pulp and little bits of gore.

Kakashi body-flickered over to the opposite side of the destruction to join the rest of the team. “That guy?” he said, while facing away from Naruto. “Don’t know him. Never met him in my life.”

Naruto had thought Dog-taichou was better than-

Wait.

He sniffed.

He couldn’t smell anything over the horrible stink that was ground zero. But Dog wasn’t like that. Naruto knew Dog! Naruto’s nose knew Dog, and Dog was looking at Nishi-sensei, not at Naruto.

And obviously what he was saying and what he was thinking were completely different things, but
Naruto didn’t understand.

He was tired, he had just killed Konoha shinobi in the defence of his team, and then his team decided that he deserved to die.

It was all he could do to breathe. He felt sick, too. And tired. And he wanted to have a good cry, but they were in the middle of a mission here, and he couldn’t afford any of it.

“Ri-rikku…?”

Killing Konoha shinobi left a nauseating taste in Kakashi’s mouth – don’t think of Rin – but traitors deserved death.

Everyone dispatched here was one less enemy infiltrating their own village.

Besides, he had been absurdly shown up by Naruto’s off-the-cuff blitz – heh – attack. If Kakashi was reading the situation right, it had been another prank-like initiative of Naruto’s clones, of which Naruto himself had not known beforehand.

That was… Kakashi disliked how ninja were prone toward overusing the word ‘terrifying’ (applying it to all sorts of mildly concerning things like preteen fangirls, A-rank nukenin, or a ticked-off Nara Yoshino), but perhaps this time it was warranted-

“Naruto!”

“Rikku!”

Kakashi thought for a moment that he had flash-backed. But, no, he was still in the present. And the large greyish white ninke that approached Naruto, that had run with Naruto for at least a year already, that had talked to Kakashi and fought alongside him… was Rikku.

The Rikku. Kakashi had not recognised him. A good third of the Pack were hairy and various shades of grey. Many were big. Naruto’s ninke could have been anyone.

He wasn’t anyone.

“Rikku… huh?” Dog-taichou pretended like he was thinking hard about the introduction, but it looked more like all those loose screws were suddenly being blasted off one by one. “I think I left the stove on-”

“Sensei’d have turned it off-”

“Perimeter check,” Kakashi cut off Naruto’s protest. “Ja ne.”

-like, two months ago? Naruto thought, because momentum dragged him there. Then it finally dawned on him that Kakashi was just pulling out one of his absurd excuses, this time to not-explain why he was running away from Rikku.

“…what?”

Rikku looked back at Naruto and made a motion that translated as an awkward half-shrug.
“It’s not like it’s the first time you two met,” Naruto pointed out. Rikku had always been around, and he had even talked to Kakashi occasionally – oh. Had Naruto really not introduced them? Kana-san would eat him alive for the rudeness. Just chomp down on some of his vital organs.

Though, it wasn’t as if Kakashi had introduced his hunt to Naruto either.

This sudden avoidance made no sense. Unless Rikku had done something?

“Rikku-?”

“This one wasn’t me,” Rikku assured him before Naruto got too deep into making up conspiracy theories.

x

“I’m too cool for this crap,” announced Akino, who had appeared out of nowhere and startled Iruka into making a long red line across the trade agreement he was correcting (or amending, or whatever the humans called it when they marked up writing with red ink). He hopped into Guruko’s armchair and sprawled, bumping Guruko off the seat.
Guruko just barely avoided landing on his nose. He snapped his teeth at Akino’s flank. “For what?”

“Kakashi. Go deal with it.”

Iruka was, predictably, on his feet and ready to run for the Tower. “What happened-?”

“He’s fine,” Akino assured him, and ignored the three dark glares he received from Iruka, Guruko and Bisuke respectively. “Pissed like a cat thrown into the pond, though.”

Bisuke sighed, hung his head, and covered his eyes with his paw.

Guruko concurred.

“Is Naruto-”

“They’re all fine, Iruka,” Akino assured him. “They just need a damn mediator, so it’s Guruko’s turn to babysit-”
“I thought I was the babysat one,” Kakashi’s mate said wryly.

“Not from what I hear tell,” Akino assured him. “I’m sleeping here. Wake me up for breakfast. And it had better not be goat.” He curled up in the chair and closed his eyes.

Guruko surrendered to the inevitable. “I’ll go check out the latest crisis. Stay alive, Iruka. We’d miss you if you died.” He pulled on his chakra and activated the jutsu that let him find his summoner anywhere in the world.

He appeared in a clearing in some pine woods. There was a smell of nearby abattoir hanging in the air, and Kakashi’s team was showing all the marks of post-battle crash, except for, you know, the conspicuous absence of heavy injuries. They really were all alright.


“Why am I the designated mediator?” Guruko complained. “I hate this crap, too.”

“Yeah, but you’re good at it,” retorted Uuhei, and turned his head to look at Kakashi, who was sitting off to the side, aggressively portraying nonchalance, even though he was in fact giving the whole world the cold shoulder.

“Oh, Inari’s Paw, that looks dire.”

x

“Wow,” Genma muttered, chewing on his senbon while Nishi cleaned up his face and rinsed his mouth in the brook.

Hopefully there wasn’t another group of these jerkwads waiting for their team to let their guard down, or they’d be… Huh. Would they be screwed? Or would chuunin-chan just pull another totally insane stunt?

“Laugh it up,” Nishi grumbled, sagging into the wet undergrowth.

“Not that.” As if it even registered for Genma anymore when people blew chunks all over the place. It was a part of the shtick. “I’m pretty fucking desensitised, but I also followed the Yellow Flash around for a while at the height of his legend. You haven’t seen carnage until you’ve seen Yellow Flash’s carnage.”

The kid did breed true, though.

“…entire Iwa platoon? So, that’s not just a story?”

“More like, most of Iwa’s army?” From what Genma remembered. Iwa was definitely demoralised enough to finally sign the fucking treaty in the aftermath. “Idiots for attacking en masse, and the Yondaime sure made them regret it.” The Third Shinobi War. As far as shitty times went it was… really fucking shitty. “But I meant that thing you said.”

Nishi blinked, startled. “What did I say?”

“You’re the one who said it,” Genma pointed out.

“I was in shock, and puking my guts out. I’ve got no idea what I said.”

“Is that it?” Genma pensively turned his face up to the overcast sky. “I thought it was the cabin fever getting to you.” He shrugged, turned on his heel and set out toward the newly established camp,
hopefully upwind from chuuunin-chan’s explosive experiment.

“Wait, Genma…” Nishi scrambled to his feet. “Genma? What did I say?”

This team had outlived its usefulness. They needed to wrap up the mission fast, or they’d blow up even more spectacularly. Genma rubbed the back of his neck to get some of the stiffness out of it, rolled his shoulders, and sucked on his senbon for a moment before the silence had stretched way too long.

“What did I say?” Nishi demanded with a hint of desperation. Poor guy was nearing the end of his rope, too.

Yeah, no wonder he had had a break like that. But Genma’s understanding was worth fuck-all to Naruto.

And Kakashi was the one that had to see Naruto’s face close-up afterwards. Shit.

“What did I say?”

Genma sighed and closed his eyes. “You told him Uzushio was destroyed because it was full of people like him, and that it was basically a good thing it got razed.”

He was glad he didn’t have to see Nishi’s face. The cursing and the dull impacts of Nishi’s knuckles against his own temple were uncomfortable enough.

Kakashi felt thoroughly disinclined to talk about it. In fact, he felt thoroughly disinclined to talk, period.

Extended missions with a new team always included some internal friction, and he had expected worse than what had happened. The shinobi he chose gelled together reasonably well, even if it gradually became clear that they were not going to become friends.

Nishi-sensei folding under the pressure was predictable enough. His outburst at Naruto stung, but it could have been managed-

-if Kakashi had held it together.

Guruko returned from his trip to the Pack’s dimension so quietly that Naruto didn’t even stir in his sleep.

Rikku-

Kakashi’s heart skipped a beat when he even thought the name.

-turned his head, reassured himself that Guruko was unthreatening, and lay back down.

This situation just highlighted that throughout the whole mission, Naruto’s hunt had been a team within the team. They cooperated well, but did not trust. They relied only on one another. Naruto wouldn’t sleep unless he had one of his ninken by his side.

There were ANBU like that. Kakashi himself had been like that at several points in his life. He had wanted better for Naruto.

“If you keep making the rabbit-ass face, the wind will change and it’ll get stuck that way. Then
you’ll have to wear the mask forever.”

Kakashi said nothing.

“You stink like all the bad things in the world rolled into a big ball of awfulness. I’m gonna have to subject myself to a bath after this – there’s no way anyone with a half-decent nose’d be willing to spend time around me.”

Kakashi stared into the darkness.

“You’re worrying everybody.”

“Hm?”

Guruko rolled his eyes. “Yeah. I think Pakkun should have told you.” He plastered himself over Kakashi’s thigh and set his head down on his paws. “But. We didn’t know what was the problem, and Pakkun refused to talk. Naruto introduced Bisuke and me to Rikku-san when Iruka was working himself to exhaustion and needed a spotter. We knew him, sort of – the Pack’s not that big. But we never talked to him before.”

“Saa,” Kakashi cut him off.

Most of his hunt was too young to remember the events before Kakashi had become chuunin. He was not angry at them.

“Yeah, I know now.” That was, in Guruko’s special grasp of human language, the rough equivalent of ‘I’m sorry for your loss; I know it sucks; we’re all here for you’.

Kakashi, for his part, was simply avidly disinclined to summon Pakkun at any time in the near future, barring extreme duress. Pakkun could argue about literal contract versus moral obligations until he was blue in the face, but this had nothing to do with a contract.

They were supposed to be friends. And if this was Pakkun’s idea of loyalty… Kakashi would rather do without it.

“I don’t tell you everything,” Guruko said pensively. His head was hung and he was facing away from Kakashi.

Guilty conscience.

Kakashi was familiar with that. “Nobody does.” Nobody told everything to anybody. Sentient beings did not work like that.

“There are things I know you would demand to be aware of that I don’t tell you,” Guruko amended.

“Like?”

Guruko shrugged. “You’ll find out by yourself, and then you’ll have to decide if you trust my judgment in not telling you… or if you don’t. So. I’m gonna go back to Iruka now before he starts pulling out hair. He’d look funny without hair.”

Kakashi didn’t say anything more. He expected that Guruko would reassure Iruka – tell him little to nothing of what truly happened, probably, and Kakashi did trust Guruko’s judgment in censoring information. For others. He hadn’t expected to have that applied to himself, too.

He had not expected it from Pakkun either.
Where on the scale of omission was the line between protection and betrayal?

Kakashi looked over the rest of his team: Genma barely fazed; Nishi-sensei teetering on the edge of hysteria and very badly pretending to sleep), and Naruto the only one who managed to fall asleep for real, somewhere under a pile of dogs.

Kakashi was declaring the mission done. They would set out for Konoha tomorrow. If there were any more saboteurs, they would confront them on home ground.

At the moment, Kakashi could very happily rip someone apart with just a shuriken.

x

Rikku rose to his feet after the medic and the ANBU finally drifted off.

Buru stretched and shifted to compensate for Rikku’s absence in the pile. Rikku nodded in acknowledgement, although Buru had already closed his eye by then, so the favour and the appreciation thereof was intrinsically understood. Gestures were unnecessary.

Hunts generally didn’t mix like this, but you made exceptions for Pack, and Naruto was a Pack puppy. You made all the exceptions for Pack puppies (else Rikku would never have come out of retirement).

Rikku’s gait was heavy with regrets as he walked past the shadow clone sentry and across a stretch of the forest to the outcropping where the team had scaled the cliff.

The fourth member of Naruto’s team was sitting on the edge, facing the awe-inspiring horizon of mountains and ravines lit up by a handful of stars where the cloud cover was torn.

“Kakashi,” Rikku spoke.

The name, too, tasted like regret.

x

“I am sorry,” said the ninken, approaching slowly but unhesitatingly. “For startling you,” he added.

That finally made Kakashi shift, if only to express a dry ‘really?’ through the new alignment of his shoulders. He had been aware of the dog’s approach since he had separated from the puppy pile.

“It didn’t occur to me you might not know…?”

Ah. That startlement. Well.

Kakashi scratched at the edge of his jaw. The mask caught on his stubble. “I have seen you with Naruto, but I don’t think I’ve heard him mention your name.” Kakashi had heard of ‘Kana-san’ and ‘Ya-san’, of Juuji and Annai, and figured out that they were the equivalent of a family for Naruto. He knew the story of little Haku, and was not touching that one with a ten-foot javelin. He vaguely remembered Kana (who couldn’t escape the attention, being Shiryuusu-sama’s daughter), but if Naruto had any other members in his hunt, they were unknown to Kakashi.

The boy had certainly not mentioned a ‘Rikku’, Kakashi was sure.

“I did not recognise you.”

“That is understandable. You were a puppy, and I only just barely more than one.” Rikku-san sat on
his haunches. “I did not mean to stir up unpleasant memories—”

“Neither did I.” They had both suffered the same loss, and served as a reminder of it to the other one. It was a little difficult to pretend that the ghosts weren’t there if the physical representation was staring him in the face; nonetheless, Kakashi was determined to give it a good try. He inclined his head, projecting nonchalance. “Rikku-san.”

The ninken briefly closed his eye. When he opened it again, there was an uncomfortably familiar pain reflected back at Kakashi. “Please,” said the dog, “call me simply Rikku. The matter of forgiveness aside—we are Pack.”

It was a lie. Not entirely—but it was an understatement. What Rikku meant was that they were a family. That without a summonner on this plane Rikku could not have traversed the dimensions and even as much as visited Kakashi, but that the distance between them had not been put there by design.

Kakashi only had to look at Naruto to understand perfectly.

It seemed like this, too, was a cycle.

He wished he could say the right thing to make this entire issue disappear. Sadly, no perfect fob-off was occurring to him, and he ended up mutely nodding.
For all those who asked - yeah, Rikku was a member of Sakumo’s hunt. I felt like it was pretty much confirmed, but apparently there's room for doubt still. If you're interested in a handful of details, be on the lookout for *A Hunt's Faith*. It's coming.

Iruka watched with a mixture of incredulity, exhaustion and elation as Hokage-sama accepted the finalized text of the treaty with Suna from the shadow clone and signed it without reading it through. The clone had read it, of course, but… as far as Iruka could tell it wasn’t *her* clone. So this was an enormous show of trust-

On the other hand, Kakashi had not trusted Iruka any less when they held those respective positions. When Iruka had put something in front of Kakashi to sign, Kakashi signed. Half the time he did not even check the title of the document.

*Kakashi.*

Iruka always missed him when he was gone for so long, and always worried when his mission lasted longer than it was supposed to, but at least this time there wasn’t an information blackout, and nobody had yet come to report Kakashi’s death (unfortunately, Iruka had a lot of practice accepting that particular piece of news).

Guruko had returned glum, and there had been a literally biting argument with Akino, which ended in Bisuke putting them both in a genjutsu – which Iruka hadn’t known Bisuke could do in the first place – until they cooled off.

No one attempted to maim anyone again, but Iruka could read the tension in the hunt.

“*You’re getting a jounin team to escort you to Suna,*” Tsunade-sama informed Shigezane-san. “Too many people around here like war, and I don’t want somebody to find your corpse and claim *we* killed you.”

“A-as you say, Tsunade-sama,” replied the Suna nin, and actually looked relieved.

“*Jiraiya,*” she snapped.

“Keep your pants on, Hime,” grumbled the Sage, reluctantly tearing himself away from his reading (Iruka dearly hoped that was not an *Icha Icha* manuscript). He leered. “Or not. I wouldn’t mind-”

“Do you even have any of your real teeth left?” Hokage-sama growled, raising a fist in illustration.

“A couple of molars,” he admitted with a shrug. “*So, this is the mighty Sand’s delegation?*” He critically surveyed Shigezane-san, whom he had ignored – or, rather, pretended to ignore – up to this point. “*Ha! They’re up a shit creek alright. Don’t worry, boy, I’ll get you home safe and… sound.*”

Shigezane-san flinched.
Iruka hoped that Jiraiya would catch a strain of something particularly uncomfortable and very difficult to get rid of.

x

It was over. It felt as though a chapter of his life has come to an end when he looked upon the conference room and realised he would not be coming back here tomorrow.

At the start it hadn’t even occurred to Iruka to doubt the evidence of his eyes. Naïve, certainly, but he had been preoccupied with being handpicked by the Hokage for a task outside of his expertise (he might have started the work on his own, but he had expected professionals to take over before the treaty was drafted, and definitely long before it was finalised) and then subjected to very intensive coaching.

Yet, as the negotiations progressed and he had spent hours upon hours in one-on-one tutoring, it became increasingly obvious that his teacher was not actually Tsunade-sama.

They managed to imitate Tsunade-sama’s manner of verbal expression – except when they delved deep into a complex topic, whereupon they, frankly, couldn’t be bothered. They went on calling Iruka ‘Umino’, since that was how Tsunade-sama kept referring to him, but by now Iruka could tell when he was speaking to the actual Tsunade-sama by her cooler, more impersonal attitude toward him.

“Enjoy the reprieve,” his teacher said with a smirk. “If we end up annexing Wave, you know who I’m tapping for the paperwork.”

Iruka didn’t groan, but the look in his eyes must have been too obviously despairing, because she laughed.

“That is the price for competence, Umino.”

“As you say, Ma’am.”

Iruka had an idea, and for the life of him he couldn’t decide whether he should do it. On one hand, he wished to acknowledge the tutelage of this amazingly intelligent and knowledgeable ninja – on the other, perhaps it would have been rude to admit that he had seen through the ruse, where obviously the ruse had been devised to protect said ninja’s identity.

Iruka didn’t want to reveal the identity. Iruka didn’t even want to know it.

He simply wished to pay his respects directly, rather than to the avatar of Tsunade-sama.

“Don’t go all timid on me now, Umino,” said the shadow clone. “You don’t succeed by playing coy.”

That was it. Iruka gathered the last of his personal possessions, stood on the threshold and bowed to deeply. “Thank you for everything you have taught me, Hokage no Kage-sama.”

“Keep up the good work, shinobi,” the clone replied simply, not acknowledging the address at all.

x

“Sensei, sensei!”

After working at the Hokage Tower for months, submerged in politics and administration, the
Academy felt surreal to Iruka. Like it was a step sideways in space-time from where it used to be.

He knew that it was himself who had moved a step in the other direction, who had been changed by new circumstances and new experience, but that didn’t help allay the alien-ness of what used to be his natural habitat for years, and his reprieve as recently as three months ago.

It felt more like half a decade.

“Iruka-sensei!” an excited child’s voice rose above the chatter of the crowd. “Are you finally back?”

Iruka smiled. “Let’s hope.”

Moegi led the charge, but the children who followed her to form a crowd around Iruka seemed to suddenly multiply.

“We missed you around here, Iruka-kun,” said Ouno-sensei, wading through the lake of preteens toward the entrance to the building. “Although, to be honest, not many expected you to return. Not after you have achieved such an elevated position.”

After the initial honest profession, Iruka had almost suspected the old man of being an imposter, so the tinge of bitter envy at the end of the statement actually reassured him.

Iruka should have gone straight home after he had finished his day at the Academy. Or remained around the training grounds. He definitely should not have gone for a run through the woods – but it was too late now. He held his breath and listened.

The silence was unnatural for a forest. And in it there were three sets of calm, quiet breaths.

When Iruka channeled chakra to his ears, he could hear three slow, calm heartbeats.

Nothing else. If they were here to train, there would have been other sounds. If they were relaxing – even if they were sleeping – there would have been other sounds. Birds and insect and all kinds of small animals.

Iruka was about to be assassinated. And since they weren’t going to underestimate the task again, it meant that this was a well-organised professional unit, and Iruka was going to die.

His ANBU escort wasn’t around. Or maybe his ANBU escort was one of them.

In a last-ditch, mad effort to survive he brought his hands together, formed the ox seal, then snake and ram, and whispered: “Kirigakure no Jutsu.”

Would it be fast enough, though? Konoha wasn’t as wet as Kiri, but it had rained recently and there were brooks all around the training fields, even a lake not so far away. He would have had a better chance with the river nearby, but the three heartbeats cut him off from that direction.

They were herding him. Away from potential witnesses, presumably.

The chill rose to stomach-height, and Iruka suppressed a shudder. He heard a change in the assassins’ vital functions – they must have realised – dropped to all four and a little awkwardly moved under the guise of the rising mist.

The jutsu was forming faster than he had remembered. It had been years since he had practiced – it was unwise to remind people in Konoha that his parents were not born here, and no matter how
strongly the Will of Fire burned in him, it would never burn out his origins.

“Jyuu,” snapped a voice.

Was that a countdown? Call-sign? Strategy code?

Did they have a sensor? Would they chance an area-affecting jutsu?

Iruka wasn’t a silent killer. His Mother had taught him very little – he was a child, and not one of those overtrained ones like Kakashi – and she had focused on giving him the tools to disguise himself and escape if he ever needed it.

Iruka moved silently, still crouched but already bipedal. The mist was rising and thickening, and he was beginning to feel the chakra drain. He could try to run – but he wasn’t strong enough to survive whatever they herded him to, so he would have to slip between them. Hoping that they didn’t have summons. Hoping that they hadn’t littered the ground with traps.

Maybe go through the trees?

Could he get the mist to rise high enough for that without draining himself to sluggishness?

He pulled out a kunai and moved toward the left-most assassin. Ideally he would pass unnoticed, but if not… the fact that he wasn’t a silent killer did not mean he could not kill at all.

Leaves crunched under his feet, but the sound was muffled by the mist; Iruka’s target misjudged his position and swung his sword too widely as Iruka surged up behind him.

Iruka’s armour caught most of the slice. The tip of the blade nicked his upper arm just before he buried his kunai in the ANBU’s neck.

Thank kami-sama for the damn armour. Thank Kakashi and Hokage-sama for forcing him into it. That slice would have otherwise gone right between his ribs.

A sharp bark sounded ahead of him and, as everyone’s attention was momentarily diverted that way, a new player arrived on the scene. There was some scuffling, some clinking – a seal-reinforced porcelain mask broke – and the wet sounds of someone drowning in their own blood.

“Umino,” said Tsunade-sama’s voice.

“Hokage-sama,” Iruka breathed, leaning back against a tree trunk and letting it carry his weight. If it was not her, he was toast. But if it was not her, why would this person kill the assassins? No, they wouldn’t.

They would have let Iruka die.

“I am honestly impressed you managed to survive that,” she remarked. “Now call off the mutts and get rid of the mist before you fall over.”

Iruka let go of the Kirigakure no Jutsu, cutting off the drain on his chakra. He did not have enough left to disperse the mist, though; it would have to dissipate on its own.

Little feet scrabbled through the undergrowth and Bisuke yelled, frightened: “Iruka? Iruka?”

“I’m here,” Iruka told him.

Guruko practically barreled into his legs and started sniffing him.
“One of your guards is dead,” Tsunade-sama informed him. “The other managed to raise an alarm.”

“Please,” Iruka begged, “fire me for incompetence.” He thought they would have lost interest in him now that he was a nobody again. “Publicly. I’ll take the humiliation to avoid dying.”

“You think this is about you?” She snorted, and a moment later she appeared from the chilly white haze in front of him. “At this point it is all about Hatake, kid. And let me have a look at that cut – if you die of poison after I went to all this trouble to save you, I’ll raise you from the dead and kill you again.”

Iruka stayed in the bathroom for as long as he feasibly could, and then a little while longer, but he couldn’t stay here indefinitely. These medical facilities were crawling with ANBU; he suspected that he not been brought to the Hospital, but rather to the ANBU Headquarters.

If he could just stop snivelling, pack it all up again, put on his game face and go out… He blew his nose into a piece of toilet paper.

Kami-sama, he couldn’t let these people – Boar-san, Lynx-san, even Hokage-sama – see him like this.

“Is he in shock?” asked Lynx-san’s voice, and Iruka was momentarily relieved that Lynx-san had not been on duty. It was a terrible thing to think.

When it finally penetrated that one of his guards was dead, his first thought had been ‘not Anko!’ and the following one ‘I hope it’s not Lynx-san’.

Lobster-san, who had supervised the medic that tended to Iruka’s wound, replied: “No, that is a perfectly normal emotional response from a man that hasn’t been trained to hide all emotional responses.”

“Oh,” Lynx-san muttered, since, apparently, not repressing every single emotion until all that remained was apathy was an unfamiliar concept. “Right.”

“He feels safe now, so he is releasing the stress. It’s actually a healthy reaction.”

For a civilian, he didn’t add. Iruka still heard it.

But that was a load of crap. He had done hundreds of missions without falling apart. So he sometimes had a good cry in the privacy of his bedroom, long after any danger had passed – like Lobster-san said, that was just catharsis. It didn’t mean that he couldn’t deal with stress.

In between teaching, Missions Desk, becoming the Acting Shadow Hokage so suddenly and being conscripted as the Fifth Hokage’s aide, Iruka was the master of dealing with stress. But being personally targeted by assassins far above his skill level, within Konoha, where he should have been able to relax… he didn’t know how he was supposed to deal with that.

And he was tired. And lonely.

Iruka wanted to go home. He wanted – needed – Kakashi. He was not feeling safe (Lobster-san was wrong). He didn’t think he would feel safe until Kakashi was back. Kakashi always felt safe (yes, Iruka heard the irony there).

Iruka had thought this was over when he returned to the Academy.
Could he even go on teaching? Was he putting the children in danger? He didn’t want to stop being a teacher, but if even one of his students was hurt because of him, it wasn’t worth it-

A door slammed open on the other side the wall. Iruka flinched.

“Jackal will pull through, but Tiger was dead before I got to them,” Tsunade-sama thundered. “Two weren’t enough. A squad wouldn’t have been enough this time, if not for Umino’s particular talents and yo-my presence. It’s time to think of a different solution.”

“I can’t root out this group yet,” Tsunade-sama replied, frustrated enough to start punching furniture.

Thanks to his acquaintance with Naruto, Iruka knew that long-lasting shadow clones could develop a measure of individuality and self-actualisation, but this was on a different level.

Not Tsunade-sama then, he thought. Her Shadow again. His teacher.

Iruka splashed water on his face one last time, steeled himself and exited the bathroom. He remained standing by the door, from where he could watch the group of some of Konoha’s most important people milling around a hospital room that was far too small to contain all of them. There were, indeed, two versions of Godaime-sama.

They were identical in appearance, but their stances, gestures and speech differed ever so slightly. Watching them like this, Iruka could only just tell them apart. It was – fascinating. Terrifying, too.

“Reverse-summoning,” suggested Hokage no Kage-sama.

“…yes,” Falcon-san agreed after a moment of quiet. “That is an excellent idea.”

“Can you teach him?” asked Tsunade-sama, seemingly forgetting that Iruka was in the room, or that Iruka was not completely unobservant.

Iruka stared at the clone (and it was definitely a shadow clone, but it was not Tsunade-sama’s, merely henged to appear like her), cataloguing every motion, every word, but mostly he just saw a version of Tsunade-sama that was less prone to anger and frustration, and had a somewhat suspect sense of humour.

Terrifying, indeed.

“I can teach,” the Bunshin said haughtily. “It is hardly my fault that most people die instead of learning.”

Tsunade-sama rolled her eyes at her. “Right. I’ll leave this in your competent hands. Keep Umino alive; we’ve only got the one of him, and Hatake’s sanity dangles off of his ankle.”

“Ankle?” Hokage no Kage-sama faux-wondered in an uncomfortably lewd undertone.

Tsunade-sama ignored her and, muttering unflattering and inaccurate accusations, swanned off.

Several of the ANBU followed her.

The clone turned to Iruka. “Fuuinjutsu is not my primary area of expertise, but this is hardly complicated. One seal goes on you, another on a fixed safe location, and if you are ever targeted again, you will activate it. Instantaneous travel—”

“Is this like the Hiraishin?” Iruka blurted out, mortified by his own rudeness but unable to help it.

Kage-sama made a so-so gesture. “Same basic principle, but you may as well ask if the Academy
kata are anything like Maito’s Gates. This is designed to be used by amateurs.” She opened her medic’s pouch and pulled out a scalpel. “Clothes off, Umino. This goes directly into your skin. It’s what we’re trying to save here.”

“I thought guard missions were supposed to be wholesome and satisfying,” Anko remarked when she found Boar drowning his sorrows – and pains – in the suspicious hooch on tap in the ANBU lounge.

That shit was nasty. He must have been really desperate for the chemical aid; almost anyone would do him a solid and fetch him something better to drink if he couldn’t go and get it himself.

Anko was here without a bottle in her hand only because she was fresh off a mission, and she’d drained the secret stash inside her locker the day before yesterday. Oops. Hopefully she’d remember to replenish that.

“Boring. Boring is what they are. And tense. And so easy to fuck up!” Boar braced himself and took another sip from the liquid hell. He shuddered. “Kami, I miss assassinations. You scope the target, you go in, you go out, done. Not all this standing around for weeks, flinching at every sudden movement or chakra flare, because what if the client is going to bite it.”

Anko sprawled on the sofa. The lounge was empty except for Boar – what with the increased Law & Order missions and Hokage-sama’s justified rage at having her pet diplomat routinely assassinated – and she was going to take full advantage of the space. “No, don’t hold back. Tell me how you feel.”

“It wasn’t like this with Yondaime-sama,” Boar complained. He wasn’t actually whinging yet, but within another glass of the moonshine he would be.

Anko snorted. Big bad hunk of a man, and he pouted like a toddler. Not that she was in any way opposed to pouting. It was way healthier than stuffing any emotional reaction behind a stoic front, and then one day breaking down from the stress.

There was a reason why the alcohol in ANBU lounge was officially sanctioned. Everyone here knew what their limits were, and this was often the only place they could afford to drink – especially if they tended to babble (or complain) when they were sloshed.

She should definitely introduce Iruka to the benefits of regular drinking.

Speaking of Iruka... “You don’t actually hate him, though-?”

“What?” Boar startled. It took him a moment to figure out who Anko was talking about. “No, of course not.”

“You come across like you do.”

Boar stared at her. At least, she thought he stared at her – he had his mask on, so she couldn’t be sure. Genjutsu mask, so he could drink, but no-face-no-name was a basic rule of courtesy in this place.

“He thinks I hate him,” Boar said dully. He downed the rest of his glass.

And sneezed.
Anko didn’t even laugh at him – that shit really was nasty. “Yeah. Kinda. On the other hand, he’s really impressed with your work ethic, ‘cause he sees you busting your arse to protect him despite that. So.”

Boar sighed and tried to rub his temples, which looked funny, since he was rubbing them through the mask. “You know him, right?”

Anko shrugged. She fancied she did know him, as well as anyone did – aside from the obvious handful of people. She wasn’t any good at making friends, and Iruka was possibly even worse, but they had, somehow, muddled through.

“Is he alright after yesterday?” Boar asked plaintively.

Anko shot upright. “After what?”
Who was Tiger? Were they someone Iruka had known? Did they meet at the Missions Desk? Had Iruka yelled at them, or had Tiger been one of those ninja with meticulous paperwork?

He knew they wouldn’t tell him no matter how many times he repeated the question.

He also knew that he would be on the lookout for faces missing from the crowd for months to come.

Maybe there would be a name on the Memorial Stone, reported KIA on some other, on-the-books mission, but most likely not. ANBU tended to just… disappear.

“Do you need to talk to someone?” Tsunade-sama demanded, with the threat of mandated therapy hanging in the air.


She snorted. “Drinking helps.”

Ah. So, this was the actual Hokage-sama.

“So Anko-san tells me,” he muttered. Anko had tried to get him drunk and talking yesterday, but they ended up only a little tipsy, and she kicked his arse in throwing all kinds of projectiles – from shuriken to hairpins and dango sticks to paperclips. *Paperclips.* Iruka was so going to learn to maim someone with a thrown paperclip – that was the kind of ridiculous but deadly thing he needed to have in his skillset.

Also, he didn’t want to know why she had access to the Yamanaka indoor training facilities, but he sure appreciated the luxury when the drizzle started.

It had been a while since he had just spent time with someone. Without Mizuki to drag him out to socialise… and unable to look Tsubaki-san in the eye… Iruka’s social circle was limited to his colleagues at the Academy and at the Missions Desk, all of whom now treated him with a… an ‘Honourable Grandson’ attitude, to borrow Konohamaru-kun’s description.

“I’m approving two weeks for you,” Tsunade-sama told him, and initialed Iruka’s leave request.

He had asked for three days. “But-”

“That was not a fucking suggestion, Umino. Get out into fresh air, get some training done before you start getting pudgy. Learn something new. There are a thousand damn ways you could spend that time productively without working. Out!”

“M-my guard-”

“Not negotiable.”

Iruka didn’t mean to argue – he just wanted to ask. But he did understand that he didn’t have the clearance for the information, now that he was not the Hokage’s aide anymore, so he shut up, went home, and didn’t look over his shoulder searching for his ANBU shadows.

Hey, Twisty,” Anko called out, sauntering into the training ground. “Long time no see, heh? Been
busy as fuck. I know, I suck…”

The boy continued impassively staring at her. He did not even blink.

Anko leaned in close, until their noses were almost touching. Only then, when he still didn’t react, she was sure that he was doing it on purpose, rather than genuinely missing the innuendo. She grinned. “Tough audience.”

“…I can see through walls,” Neji-boy reminded her.

…alright. Anko could begin to imagine some of the consequences of that. Like, little kids who couldn’t sleep at night experimenting with their doujutsu instead of, y’know, counting enemy shinobi until they snoozed, or whatever it was normal kids were supposed to do. Anko was understandably fuzzy on the subject.

“You’re saying I can’t do anything to shock you?”

Neji body-flickered out of her reach – Anko was so proud! – and when he stood still again, she could see his grimace. “Please, do not. Anything you could do to shock me would be scarring.”

Anko leered, steepled her fingers and flexed them with a nice, intimidating cracking sound.

Neji’s expression smoothed out; there was a kunai in his hand, hidden by the overlong sleeve.

Good boy. He was learning so much. Most importantly, he was learning how not to let the Hyuuga’s blinkered reliance on their provably limited taijutsu kill him.

Anko was so proud.

“Umino-sama-”

“No,” Iruka snapped, and slammed the door shut.

Or, rather, he would have slammed the door shut, except that Lynx-san was faster than Iruka could dream of being.

Lynx-san pushed the door open and stepped forwards – ever-so-slightly forwards. He remained on the threshold, as if there was some kind of a ward keeping him from entering the apartment. “I… apologise. Iruka-san.”

That was an unexpected breach of protocol. Not the door thing – Iruka completely expected to have his privacy invaded by now – but the form of address Lynx-san used. All Iruka’s guards called him ‘Umino-sama’. It was part of the ANBU culture of mysticism: ‘ooh, we’re the spirits of creeping death and order without any real identities, might as well be ghosts, fear us but don’t tell anyone you’ve seen us’!

Since Iruka had known Kakashi when he was a fourteen-year-old new ANBU recruit – and now found out that Anko was in ANBU – that air of mystery was wasted on him.

On the other hand, the keen awareness that they were people prevented him from glossing over Tiger-san’s death. He wasn’t going to let something like that happen again if he could prevent it.

“I’m not going back to the Academy,” Iruka said definitively. He could not. It was not a risk worth taking.
“I am not here not about that,” Lynx-san replied. He relaxed slightly. “Or, not only about that. I was worried – are you truly alright? I could not forgive myself if you were struggling and I didn’t offer all the support I could.”

“This isn’t a part of your job,” Iruka pointed out. He heard Bisuke stir in the bedroom and pad to the hall to check out what was happening.

“No, it is not,” Lynx-san admitted easily. “However, I owe very much to Kakashi… san… and I know that your well-being is important to him.”

Iruka heard the hesitation before the suffix; apparently Lynx-san usually called Kakashi something different.

Taichou, possibly? Or…? Kakashi didn’t have many close friends. And Iruka was certain that the man hiding under Lynx-san’ mask was not Maito Gai.

That left one option. Iruka did not know this shinobi’s name, but he guessed that he wasn’t risking anything by inviting him inside the apartment. He had not had a guest here in… about eight years? Since he became chuunin, probably.

For obvious reasons, on the rare occasions when he socialised, he was always the one who visited other people.

Lynx-san stepped into the hall tentatively, as though he were encroaching upon some kind of sacred ground.

“Tea?” Iruka suggested in the absence of anything else that wasn’t a demand for the man to introduce himself.

“Yes, please!” Lynx-san said with a lot more enthusiasm than Iruka expected. “Kakashi… san said that you make the best tea he had ever tasted. Err… maybe not in so many words.”

Iruka chuckled. It was such an absurd notion – the best tea? not by any criterion – but Kakashi liked to brag in his own, back-handed way. And… well, Iruka had not had many reasons to laugh lately. Every single one was much appreciated.

x

Genma was beginning to feel the wear of the trip back to Konoha. If the entire mission had been like this, he would have gone darkside himself – staged the brutal murder of Kakashi and Nishi by the enemy shinobi, grabbed the kid and made a run for home ground.

Or, more likely, died trying when Kakashi didn’t let himself be killed. Either way, there was a limit to how long even a guy as easy-going as Genma could stand the tension.

Nishi acted like he had committed a capital offence and was waiting for his execution.

Kakashi had gone post-Uchiha-Massacre weird. Genma could sense him when he focused, scouting not too far ahead, but they had neither seen nor heard him in more than four hours.

And Naruto just pretended that he hadn’t noticed. He ran at a steady pace, happily chattering with the dogs – all the dogs, just to ensure that Kakashi’s summons weren’t feeling excluded by Kakashi’s silence, apparently. At one point he had had to dissuade them for making a detour and finding a bear whose tracks they crossed – apparently they wanted to make up for the one they had passed up at the start of the mission.
And now, it seemed, Naruto had moved on to discussing politics with Uuhei.

“…let’s hope she’ll make it, or taichou’s dodged the title of Godaime just to become Rokudaime.”

“There’s still Jiraiya,” Uuhei pointed out.

“He’d fake his death,” Naruto said with unwarranted confidence. Then he grimaced. “We don’t want him, anyway. He’d be so bad at it. I mean, not bad like he wouldn’t want to do it – Tsunade doesn’t wanna do it either, and she’s going to be fine.”

Genma raised his eyebrows. It wasn’t the most outrageous thing he had ever heard – the top ten were all things Kakashi, Anko and Kushina-san had said – but it was still up there. Looked like chuunin-chan had some contacts in high places, and all the irreverence of a court jester.

His Mother’s son, definitely.

“Bad how, then?” asked Genma.

Naruto tensed (Juuji and Annai suddenly appeared in front of him, incidentally between him and Genma, like a pair of toothy bodyguards).

Genma fancied he had come to know the kid well enough – he had observed him almost obsessively for the past three months – and this definitely wasn’t a typical reaction for him.

“He’s a selfish coward,” stated the boy.

There was no arguing with that tone.

Nishi looked like he was about to break his repentant silence to protest; Genma flung a pine cone at him to shut him up. Nishi batted it away, but his attention was redirected for long enough to keep him from making an ass of himself. Again.

“Everybody makes mistakes,” Genma suggested, shrugging to indicate that he was just throwing it out there, not really arguing.

Chuunin-chan was savvy enough to catch that, even though he looked like he kind of expected a fight. So, personal stuff. Personal stuff with Jiraiya – yeah, that would be absurd for any fresh chuunin, except the one whose Father was the Yondaime.

Kid had reasons to be bitter.

“He accepts responsibilities and then abandons them,” Naruto explained. “Not just me. Others, too. Pakkun-san knows where the bones are buried.”

“You mean taichou’s summon?” Nishi asked, very confused.

“Yeah,” Naruto confirmed. “We talk Pack stuff.”

Kakashi should have been taking part in the conversation. Genma didn’t doubt that Kakashi was somehow keeping an eye and ear on them, but he didn’t even do anything to piss them off to inspire them to gang up on him. He was very off even for Kakashi, even for Hound, and Genma was wigging out again.

He kept trying to poke at the guy, but nothing ever touched him.

He could stonewall almost better than he could blindside, the utter bastard.
“This is not how I hoped we would meet,” Lynx-san said after an awkward pause.

Iruka was glad he had the tea to busy himself with. All the topics he wanted to discuss were off limits (Tiger-san, Kakashi), or would lead to an argument (Iruka refusing to go back to the Academy). “Me neither,” he said dully.

But, Lynx-san had been watching Iruka for a while now, so it wasn’t like he didn’t know what Iruka was like. There was no chance to improve upon the initial impression anymore.

Iruka smiled while he arranged the teapot and the cups on a tray.

When he turned around, Lynx-san was scrutinising the kitchen. Kakashi wasn’t much for decorating, and Iruka found knick-knacks to be an annoying repository of dust, so the room did look quite… bare.

“You have done impressive work on the peace treaties,” Lynx-san said. He sounded quite genuine in his praise.

“No Rain patrols,” Kakashi reported to his team. He would have felt more secure if he had spotted anyone; it seemed unlikely that Ame would neglect guarding their borderlands, especially in light of the threat of war between Konoha and Suna.

“Do we make a detour south?” asked Naruto.
“No.” Kakashi’s tone successfully discouraged further conversation.

For a while, at least.

“So,” Genma said after a few minutes of quiet running, but still obviously having been waiting for Kakashi to make an appearance, “if Tsunade-sama flees into the night, the Fire Nation’s doomed to apocalypse? Because I see spectacular chaos and destruction once Kakashi becomes our glorious leader.”

Kakashi considered the suggestion, and judged it to be in line with Genma’s sense of humour. He personally found nothing particularly amusing about the notion.

He hated the post, hated the title, hated the very idea, and Genma’s obvious provocation was not nearly close enough to reality to make any part of it substantial. It did not even qualify as satire.

Nishi-sensei laughed, but it was forced.

Naruto, who would usually jump on that kind of imagined mayhem, side-eyed Genma with a blatant ‘are you stupid?’ expression. “Were you deep undercover for months before this mission?”

Granted, that was the only rational explanation for what Genma had said.

Genma finally figured out that he had no appreciative audience on this team, and deflated. “Yeah, yeah. Umino. We all noticed Kakashi’s his sock-puppet.”

Kakashi was not sure what this was supposed to mean.

Genma impassively stared at him for about three seconds, and then broke down laughing.

Kakashi sighed. Why had he thought Genma was the sane one again?

Lynx-san departed less than an hour after he arrived, leaving behind empty containers of Ichiraku Ramen. The lunch had been at once a thoughtful gift and a suggestion of how much Kakashi trusted the man.

Lynx-san had not only been aware of what Iruka meant to Kakashi before the recent (hopefully very limited) spread of the information, but knew enough about Iruka to bring his favourite food.

“How well do you know him?” Iruka asked of Bisuke while Guruko pretended to still be asleep in the bedroom.

Bisuke tried to press his face into Iruka’s shirt.

Iruka tolerated this for a while, because Kakashi’s ninken have already saved his life at least twice, and it wasn’t as if he didn’t like them. He just wasn’t big on all the canine physicality.

“Was he on Kakashi’s squad?” Iruka amended, shoving Bisuke – gently – away.

“For almost a decade,” Bisuke admitted. “He was really disappointed when Kakashi quit ANBU. It’s good to see him doing fine.”

Iruka absently stared at the shrine for his parents and wondered if maybe Lynx-san was feeling left behind. Abandoned. Maybe Lynx-san, too, needed friends. Iruka would have to think about it some more, and when he decided, he’d ask Bisuke for the man’s civilian identity (unless Lynx-san came...
back and introduced himself of his own free will).

After all, it wasn’t fair for Iruka to remain in the dark while Kakashi talked to his ANBU friends, was it? Turnabout was fair play. And, at the end of the day, Iruka was not so very much concerned about fair.

He was a chuunin, and not a lightweight one. People forgot when they heard that he was a teacher or that he had done one mission outside the village in the last five years (or when they witnessed him bawling his eyes out after he had nearly been assassinated by fake ANBU), but he was still a ninja.

“He’ll come back,” Bisuke assured him.

Iruka shrugged. Now that Lynx-san was gone, his mood was gradually sinking again. Loneliness and boredom were a terrible combination. He wished Kakashi were home already.

And, huh, Kakashi’s poor misshapen cactus was blooming.

Iruka wondered why he hadn’t noticed that before.
Friends in Odd Places

Tsunade was glad to see Hatake’s team arrive home without any losses. She was utterly unsurprised by the initial verbal report, and expected to be similarly unmoved by both Lobster’s and the team members’ written reports.

Lobster ordered Hatake to follow him, and the boy – as a former ANBU – complied with outward apathy.

“Ah shit,” muttered Shiranui, watching his team lead’s back until it moved out of sight.

“Are we under suspicion?” Aokabi asked nervously.


Shiranui smirked for a moment, then pursed his mouth around the ever-present senbon, and muttered: “Nah, it’s just that I’m going to be next. And at this rate, Lobster will have me pulled out of bed. No point in crashing in the first place.”

“Well, I am going to crash,” Aokabi retorted, and turned to Tsunade with that familiar medic-specific hero-worship face. “By your leave, Tsunade-sama?”

Tsunade waved him off, and didn’t comment when Shiranui decided that the permission extended to him, too.

Naruto shifted his weight from foot to foot.

Tsunade sighed. “Out with it, kid.”

“Is Kakashi-taichou very mad at me, d’you think?”

Tsunade stared at him without comprehension. What the fuck kind of insecurity was she dealing with here? “That depends. Did you kill somebody he liked? He doesn’t react so well to that, I hear.”

The kid shrugged. “Not liked, but I kinda shredded those guys he’d waited for so long, and there wasn’t enough left of them to properly identify. I didn’t mean to – I just…”

“Panicked?” Tsunade suggested.

Naruto glumly nodded.

“Kid, if your panicked reaction is to kill the attacking enemy with prejudice, that’s fine. We don’t actually expect anything more complicated from chunin. If Hatake wanted to play the long game, he would have taken a jounin-exclusive team.”

The kid chewed through this idea for a while, and just about when Tsunade inhaled to shout him out of her office, he grinned, saluted and ran off with shouted: “Thanks, ba-san! See you ‘round!”

Tsunade snorted again.

“Kakashi is pissed, though,” muttered Porcupine, who was the first one to pick up on just how very much Tsunade believed in strict discipline. Probably because he was the one that routinely watched her get falling-down drunk.
“Chatter,” Tsunade snapped back, because her ANBU guard wasn’t supposed to snark at her. Although, he did have a point. “Zebra will sort it out.”


Naruto took a deep breath – but, no, that wasn’t it. The smells were all the usual ones, mixed together into that familiar scent of home territory.

*Weird* to be alone, he thought. He had been surrounded by his team and his hunt for such a long time. He kept opening his mouth to speak, only to realise that there was nobody to listen.

He ambled down the road in the direction of the Ichiraku’s. He needed his fix of ramen – he couldn’t understand how he had gone so long without noodles, and he needed a taste of familiarity in this new Konoha. What was so unusual about the village, though?

He couldn’t identify anything. But, then, maybe Konoha was still the same. Maybe it was Naruto that had changed. Three months in the wild, doing all sorts of stuff he had never done before: tracking enemies, negotiating with former invaders in a hidden city, running down rivers and up cliffs… Yeah, that made sense.

Naruto was different, but ramen would re-center him, so Ichiraku’s it was.

He kinda wished the rest of the team would have gone along, so they could get mentally ready to part, but they seemed sick of the company. They were gone within a second after Tsunade had dismissed them, anyway, leaving Naruto standing there alone like a fence post-

“Naruto!”

He turned.

Sakura was running up the street, with Ino on her heels. That was also very strange. Naruto had not given Sakura a single thought over the length of his mission, and the idea that she might have missed him was just *weird*.

“Uh… hi?” he said, confused.

“Naruto…” Sakura repeated, coming to a halt in front of him. She put her hands together and wrung them. Her shoulders were hunched, and it seemed to take her a lot of effort to speak. Once she got there, however, what she had to say came out in a single burst of words: “Sasuke’s gone missing!”

“Damn it!” Ino hissed. “You should have let him sit down first.”

“What do you mean *Sasuke’s gone missing*?!” Naruto heard his voice rise to a holler, but he didn’t particularly care. What the – had the bastards decided he was more trouble than he was worth and ‘lost’ him? If so, Naruto was really sodding sorry, but Kakashi would have to take the damn Hat again, because Naruto was going to kill-

“He left the village,” Sakura said wetly. She didn’t cry, but she looked like she wanted to.

Ino put an arm around her shoulders – and that was a new development. Three months ago, these two girls would have bitten off one another’s nose if they could have gotten away with it.

Naruto breathed in and out, deeply, reminding himself that it wasn’t that bad. It wasn’t the worst –
Sasuke was not dead. Had not been assassinated by his own village. There was still a way to make it right.

Good.

Damn it, when did he start to care? How had he not noticed? And was this why Konoha had seemed so strange to him?

No, that was absurd. He was putting together two unrelated feelings. Konoha had not changed all that much – not like the last Uchiha’s absence made a huge difference. To Naruto personally it mattered, but not that much. He and Sasuke hadn’t been close. They were possibly beginning to get somewhere, but it was just a maybe-one-day sorta thing.

“Are… are you okay?” Sakura asked quietly.

Naruto nodded. He smiled. Widely. “Sure. Bastard wasn’t all that quiet about wanting to get the hell away from here, so it’s not like anybody’s surprised, right?”

Ino grimaced.

“I just wanted to be the one to tell you,” Sakura said, unusually subdued. “‘cause… it was partly my fault.”

Naruto opened his mouth to say that it wasn’t – and closed it. It would have been, partly – wouldn’t it? All those heads up Sasuke’s butt, and hers had been one of them. So had Ino’s.

He shrugged. “Thanks. I appreciate it.” He grabbed a lamppost – huh, Lamppost, what a damn loss of a pun that would have been great in any other situation – and slung himself up to the closest roof, before the girls could even think of following him. Ichiraku’s would be there tomorrow. Right now Naruto needed to think, and punch stuff… and maybe talk to some people, but only after he had thought and punched stuff first. He leapt over the roofs, absently noticing the streets, the people, the unchanged pulsing of town life.

This new Konoha was strange, and Naruto didn’t like it all that much. And if this was how Kakashi-taichou felt all the time (his precious people were mostly gone, weren’t they?) then Naruto wasn’t surprised at all that the guy was kinda cracked.

x

“You know,” Ino said thoughtfully, shielding her eyes with her hand as she stared upwards where Naruto had disappeared over the roofs, “I was so shocked when they promoted him.”

“Yeah,” Sakura agreed.

“But no as shocked as I was when I saw him kick Neji’s arse.”

Sakura shook her head. “That was surreal. I couldn’t believe it was Naruto.”

Ino let her hand down and shrugged. “But when you told me about how he knew things, it made me stop and think – what do I actually know about him? If he really was the Phantom of Konoha, it means he was doing the equivalent of solo C-rank missions for years before we even graduated from the Academy.”

“What?” Sakura frowned, trying to think back to when those rumours began to circulate. Right. Now they all knew that the Phantom was Naruto, and it became just one more way Naruto was different,
and acted out... but before, before they found out it was Naruto... “We thought the Phantom was cool.”

“Because he really was,” Ino replied, grinning. “And then we thought he was just a ‘naughty boy’ doing ‘bad things’. Welcome to how propaganda works, Forehead. It’s really interesting stuff.”

It wasn’t Asuka.

From his position on the ground Sasuke stared up – and up – at the bird he had summoned.

She was the size of a room, and that was with her wings folded. If she extended them, they might have spanned the entire clearing he and Natsuko used as a training field.

Sasuke was winded with how much chakra the jutsu took out of him.

“Small things should be at least polite,” announced the pelican.

Sasuke climbed to his feet. He did not feel like getting stepped on.

“Good evening,” said Natsuko, who had been promised another spar with Asuka – one that she could actively participate in, for a change. She was presently eyeing this new summon with interest. “I’m afraid it would be unwise for Tomio-kun to reveal his true name, but impolite to offer a fake one.”

Right. Sasuke had not even thought of that.

The bird gave him a considering look, and decided to accept the excuse. Sasuke might be owing Natsuko a favour. Another favour.

“It’s fine. Asuka told me who you are. Call me Chikako.”

“Why did she tell you?” Sasuke demanded.

Natsuko shook her head in exasperation.

Sasuke scowled.

“Tried to convince me to give a damn, I guess,” replied Chikako. “I was intrigued. But, looking at you, I think she’s finally cracked. What are you good for?”

“I make great teriyaki,” Sasuke retorted, threat loud and clear.

There was a moment of silence.

Then Chikako laughed uproariously; the wind from her wings beating nearly pushed Sasuke off his feet.

Sasuke hadn’t been kidding – the customers had praised his teriyaki to Tsujimoto-san – but he also did not mind that the massive pile of feathers didn’t try to attack him.

“Asuka was right. You will make a passable Godfather for Shou,” the pelican announced grandly.

“Hn,” Sasuke replied, although he didn’t like being conscripted like that. Nobody had said anything about any kind of patronage; Asuka just told him to keep the vermin alive for a while.
“Godfather?” Natsuko inquired, intrigued.

“Boy gave little Shou the weapon he needed to survive his siblings. He’s the last one left!” Chikako sounded like a proud parent herself. Was she Shou’s mother?

“And you don’t mind that?” Natsuko said, disconcerted. “I thought it was in the interest of every clan to have many strong children.”

“If they let a younger brother kill them, they weren’t strong enough.”

Sasuke did not like where this discussion was going.

Fortunately, Natsuko once again steered it elsewhere: “I cannot imagine anything more precious than a sibling. I had a younger brother. I would give anything for him to be well.”

“I killed my younger brother,” Chikako replied idly, left utterly cold by Natsuko’s confession.

Natsuko’s eyes widened. It was the first time ever Sasuke saw her legitimately horrified by anything. “Why would you-?”

Chikako turned her head to the side and looked at the kunoichi down the length of her beak. “I was hungry. He tasted like chicken.”

This time it was Sasuke who laughed.

x

Iruka looked up from stirring the stew and skipped right over ‘are you alright?’ to: “What happened?”

“Maa, just a working lunch with Yamanaka-san,” Kakashi replied, falsely cheerful.

Since Iruka wasn’t the type to give in to panic and act without recognising the potential consequences, he first turned down the flame (before he forgot about the stew) and only then invaded Kakashi’s personal space. He took his time with the very close, careful examination of his partner.

Kakashi looked wrung out and hostile – that could have been a side-effect of the exhaustion, but in light of the session with an interrogation expert he had just been subjected to, it was probably his self-preservation instinct screaming bloody murder.

“Bath?” Iruka suggested.

“Shower,” Kakashi countered. He turned away, moving out of reach before Iruka could decide whether trying to touch him was a good idea. On his way to the bathroom he added, seemingly to himself: “A cold one.”

Iruka accepted the disinvitation and the tacit request for some alone time so Kakashi could screw his head back on, and he returned to the stew. It bubbled ominously, but it hadn’t had the chance to burn yet. He gave it a stir with just a little more vehemence than necessary.

He knew the psychological evaluation was a good idea. In theory, he commended Tsunade-sama for ordering it.

On paper Kakashi’s mission in the Land of Rivers seemed… perhaps not quite innocuous as such, but definitely sensible. His assignment and his choice of team made perfect sense – and their success
spoke for itself. It hadn’t even occurred to anyone to point a finger and say ‘but, look, this is clearly a personal crusade’.

Iruka knew how personal this was for Kakashi. Sure, a war with Suna would have affected everyone, and they would have been worse for it. Peace-keeping was a public service. There were very few people who remembered how the Third Shinobi War started – how *Suna* declared it on *Konoha*. How, despite the fact that it had been brewing for years, fingers were pointed at a man who *allegedly* caused it.

Indeed, very few recalled who was the first victim of that war. Killed by his own hand, perhaps, but his death laid at the feet of stupid, short-sighted allies who had frozen him out as though he were a traitor. When, in fact, he was possibly the most loyal of them all.

Yes, Iruka thought, looking at their bubbling dinner. A psychological evaluation was a good idea. And, swallowing down the guilt, he tried not to imagine how the news of Sasuke’s *defection* would have further compromised Kakashi’s state.

For all that the man tried to pretend his heart was made of stone, he had gotten attached to the other two gennin under his tuition, too.

x

“That should be all,” Falcon said, blessedly, at the tail end of a two-hour debriefing. Far, far from the worst Genma had ever experienced, but sadly it had taken him through the ‘falling asleep upright’ stage and thrust him into the manic exhaustion on the other side.

“D’you know if Zebra’s gone home already?” he asked, hooking his arm over the backrest of his chair and letting his head fall back. No new stains on that ceiling, huh?

Falcon scoffed. “Zebra doesn’t go home these days.”

Genma blinked. His senbon went up and down, tilted by his teeth. “Huh?”

Falcon signed his report and added it to a thick folder. “He just falls unconscious at his desk. I’ve taken to calling Chouza down to pick him up and carry him somewhere he won’t wake up with a crick in his neck.”

“Not like we need more pain in the necks here, huh?” Genma punned, and grinned. Stupid things didn’t seem funny to him all the time, but at this moment the bar was set pretty low.

“You could start with fucking off, Dragonfly,” Falcon informed him dryly. “It’s bad enough I’m letting one daylighter down here on the regular. I don’t need my own people rebelling.”

With a tortured groan, Genma rose to his feet (he knew an order when he heard one). “I’ll try and drag Zebra with me. Any clue what the issue is?”

“Whatsoever it is, ‘Uchiha Sasuke’ seems to be the trigger phrase. Tread softly, Dragonfly – Zebra’s gone twice as nasty since we lost Tiger.”

Genma didn’t take much seriously, but Zebra was a fucking piece of work at the best of times – which, yeah, was most of why Genma liked to spend time with him – and much as Genma loved poking at people’s sore points, he liked *not believing that he was a literal dragonfly* better. Zebra had done that to him before (granted, Genma had deserved it).

And Tiger would be missed. She had been good fucking people. *Shit*. 
Maybe Genma wouldn’t say ‘so, Uchiha, huh?’ instead of ‘hi’. Just this once.

“Yeah, I’ll let my pretty, pretty wings keep me afloat,” he announced.

And fled before Falcon literally kicked him out of the room.

“Are you crying?”

Iruka looked up and met Bisuke’s eye. He wiped his cheeks, and then promptly negated the attempted camouflage by sniffing. That set off another sob in his chest, and at that point he could deny it until the sky turned polka-dotted green, and Bisuke would just keep looking at him skeptically.

It wasn’t a cute look on him. That probably meant he was off duty right now. About to try to con more chow out of Iruka, probably, since Kakashi had disappeared into the night with a wave of his hand and a muttered “later”.

“Anything I can do?” Bisuke inquired instead.

Iruka uncurled from a ball and folded his legs into a lotus position. He wondered. When he got like this – upset – he didn’t want to be touched, so a puppy pile was the last thing he needed to have forced on him right now.

Fortunately, all of Kakashi’s ninjen knew him well enough to not even try.

“You could not mention this to anyone,” Iruka suggested, wiping away a new wave of tears. He blew his nose.

For kami-sama’s sake, this was such a selfish, childish reaction. And he was… ashamed. He was ashamed. But he was tired. He knew he should have been here for Kakashi, supported him; but he was tired. He should have smiled and held his partner and helped heal the latest hurt, whatever it was, but he was so tired.

Iruka had been looking forward to Kakashi’s return. He had not expected to be frozen out like this. He had imagined that Kakashi coming back would mean a chance to finally rest and-

He failed to show grace in the face of that disappointment. He liked to think that he would not have failed so badly if he hadn’t been so bone-deep exhausted, but that was not helpful to Kakashi at all.

“Duuude, I’ve dogged your steps for months…”

Bisuke paused to acknowledge the pun. Iruka snorted – weakly, but still.

“…and you basically own jounin daily. Anybody who says shit about you is gonna have to eat it, too.” He grinned.

Iruka’s lips quirked up. He stretched, and then tried to shake out the numbness from his hands. His stomach ached. Crying sucked. “I need a friend.” Somebody he could confide in and rely on and accept comfort from, so that all the weight of his stress didn’t land on Kakashi – especially at times like this when Kakashi was neck-deep in his own strife.

Bisuke moved in, flash-fast, and dragged his raspy, wet tongue over the side of Iruka’s face. “What you need is Pack.” He let himself be pushed away out of licking distance without even an attempt on

It wasn’t – it wasn’t the same as a human friend. A human ninja friend. It wasn’t going to fill the void Iruka was feeling.

But it was leagues better than sitting here alone blubbery like a little kid. He mustered up a smile. “Yeah.”

Naruto came back from punching things so exhausted he was ready to fall face-first into his bed. If he even still had a bed.

He was pretty nervous approaching his apartment building. There was no telling what he would find there. Had anybody broken in? Had they just taken the valuable stuff – of which there wasn’t much – or had they destroyed everything to get back at the Kyuubi?

His door was still locked. That looked hopeful?

He disarmed his traps – all but one were armed, recently re-set – and carefully inched inside.

Everything looked fine. Maybe even tidier than he had left it. And most of his plants were alive!

Naruto owed somebody a huuuge favour.

Though, most likely, that somebody wasn’t Kono-kun. He’d bet on… Udon. Possibly Moegi, but Naruto just had a feeling about little Four-Eyes. Udon looked like the kinda guy that carried a little diary in his pocket and marked down in the little ‘day’ boxes what he had to do and where and when… A long-term planner kinda person.

Naruto had never done things like that. He usually just woke up and went out to find out what was happening today. Life was way less boring that way.

On the other hand, if somebody had asked Naruto to water their plants while they were gone, Naruto would probably forget for, like, two weeks, and get there to find sad little starved plant corpses. So, if it was really Udon who had Naruto’s back here, that definitely added major cool points to the nerdery.

But, Konohamaru Corps later. First-

There was a folded piece of paper on the floor, half stuck under the matt. Someone must have pushed that under the door, but it would have been a while ago; there was no identifying scent left on it. Naruto picked it up, unfolded it, and read: ‘A-rank. Contact at Fujino-Cho. No idea what is happening. If I die, kill that man for me.’

Naruto felt like someone had hit him over the head. Everything went sort of hazy and floaty. Sasuke trusted him? Or, at least, trusted him more than anyone else in the village. Naruto’s throat squeezed, and there was an odd pain in his chest.

And his hands hurt, because he had been punching things. For no reason, it seemed.

He had a hunch. But he’d need some help confirming it.

“Kuchiyose no jutsu!”
“Yo.”

Anko stared at the little dog that just spoke to her. For a moment she considered playing oblivious, but it wasn’t like Crumpet-puppy would play along. If he had gone so far as to seek her out, obviously he had something to say.

“Hey, Cookie Crumb,” she replied, and turned away from him to peruse the lit-up entrances along the street below. None of the bars or restaurants looked inviting enough, but she also definitely wasn’t in the mood to sit through a movie.

She didn’t have a body-guard shift until the day after tomorrow.

Decisions, decisions. If worse came to worst, she could pick up an extra mission, but she’d been doing that less and less ever since… the seal had been removed. Freedom! She was going to enjoy it to the fullest!

Thaaanks, sensei.

“Have you tried the teahouse in Wisteria Square?” inquired dog number eight.

Anko snorted. “What are you? My life coach?” Still, she did stand up from the crouch and start walking along the rooftops in the direction he had suggested. Teahouses weren’t exactly her scene, but she was willing to try them out. Could be interesting. And if not, well, she wouldn’t go back.

Easy peasy.

Lately, people didn’t even glare at her when she entered somewhere. It was like Konoha had become a whole other place since the Godaime took over. Which, Tsunade-sama was bitchin’. With the apostrophe and all. Just… bitchin’.

“Iruka likes their tea,” remarked Crumpet.

“If you’re asking about my intentions,” Anko drawled, “you’re years too late.” She had explicitly invited Iruka into her bed often enough that it became a bit of a running gag between them. She would have fucked him, too. He was cute, and a nice guy, and definitely would have been all solicitous about her pleasure before his. Yum.

Not Anko’s type… but, then again, in a lot of ways exactly Anko’s type. She could play the hardened whore all she liked, but ultimately she was attracted to people she felt like she could rely on.

“I can tell that for myself,” Kakashi’s ninen retorted dismissively. “Look, you trust them both, don’t you?”

Oh? Anko mused. Was Crumpet admitting that Kakashi and Iruka were a family unit of their own, with a bunch of mutts instead of children? How sweet.

Tragically, they transcended scandalousness, which was a damn shame. She couldn’t even really mock them about their hard-won, hard-worked-for, paid-for-in-blood domesticity. They didn’t just luck into it or anything, so she couldn’t resent them.

They were, to be frank, the one fair success story.

“Hey,” she muttered, leaning over the edge of the roof, so she could check out the place he had recommended, “how ‘bout you tell me what you actually want? I’m off duty, and I’m so not in the
mood to deal with anybody’s cryptic bullshit.”

“Iruka told me he’d like to have a friend,” the ninken said after a barely noticeable hesitation.

Anko frowned. Hadn’t she been obvious enough…?

Crumpet huffed. “Do you even know him, Dove-kun? He doesn’t do implied. Especially not if it requires him assuming that other people like him.”

That was so sad. Anko herself had problems accepting that other people liked her, but that was based on a lot of mind-shattering pain followed by years of systemic abuse. Granted, she had an idea of how it screwed up your life if a person close to you turned out to be a traitor, but as far as she knew that other teacher fellow had only hurt Iruka’s feelings rather than full-on crisp-fried his brain?

Because Naruto curbstomped the shitstain the second after he tried anything?

Whatever. She couldn’t expect to understand everybody’s weird hang-ups.

“So,” she inquired, making her way down the wall to street ground, “does this recruitment speech include some sort of incentive?”

The ninken just gave her a baleful look and bounded off along the building’s external corridor on the third floor, jumped over the banister and disappeared into the night.

Anko continued on her mission to check out the teahouse. Maybe tea would help her think up a plan of attack. It wasn’t as though she actually needed any incentive to be Iruka’s friend. She was Iruka’s friend. Done deal.

Somebody just needed to teach the chew-toy what a ‘friend’ looked like, so he could identify it when it dragged him out for a night on the town.

x

The gate opened a sliver; the head of the Head of the Clan stuck out of it and said: “Can I help you?”

She didn’t seem either welcoming or inimical. There was no distrust, no reproachful ‘you have been standing there for the past twenty-three minutes’. For a ninja, that was an admission that she knew who he was, what he was doing there, and was willing to pretend that she hadn’t noticed his hesitation. It was very courteous of her.

“May I speak with Kuromaru?” Rikku asked, acknowledging all the things she didn’t say.

Of course he knew Tsume-san. She was Kuromaru’s human partner – he spoke of her highly, even if not all he said was complimentary. They were a good team.

Rikku knew that he shouldn’t have come here. These people were not his Pack, and at times like these he knew he could (and should) rely on the Pack. And still – when he thought of whom he wished to speak with, the answer was clear. And then, when he finally convinced himself to come to this place, he remained frozen, hesitant, like… like Naruto. A child Naruto, so uncertain of his welcome, with a paper bag full of grilled chicken grasped spastically in his hand, facing the damn door as if the obstacle it formed was insurmountable.

Inari’s Tails – was Naruto contagious?

Tsume-san laughed at Rikku’s expression and opened the gate wider. “Kuromaru vouched for you,
so you’re welcome here, friend.”

Rikku’s ears twitches.

He hadn’t truly expected to be turned away, but to be called a friend without even a proper introduction…?

“It is my honour, Tsume-san,” he replied formally, and trotted past the wall, past the Inuzuka Clan Head and toward the porch of the Head’s home. There, on a thick woven mat, sat Kuromaru, and watched Rikku with the curiosity of someone that had observed his indecisiveness for upwards of twenty minutes.

“Play nice guys,” Tsume-san barked their way. “I’m busy in the training arena, so if you need something, hunt down one of the kids, yeah? Bratlings might as well pull their weight. Oh, and, Rikku-san – basic houseguest rules are: claws and teeth stay out of the kids, food is free for everyone, and no indoors sparring. Nice meetin’ ya!” She disappeared through the door.

Rikku shook his head. “I don’t believe Naruto is not related to these people.”

Kuromaru lifted himself first on his front legs, then on the hind ones; his joints popped. “Who even knows. Now, run first, then chow, and then you’ll tell me what haunts you.”

“Kana-san!”

Naruto barreled into her and bowled her over. Kana wasn’t used to him having body mass comparable to hers, but there he was – a big strapping ninja, hugging her with enough force that she squirmed to remind him to mind her bones.

“Kana-san, I missed you!” the boy exclaimed into her ear. “I had a whole lotta time to miss everything, and I did, but I missed you, and now it just hit me all over how long it’s been and-”

“I missed you, too, Naruto,” Kana replied before he could repeat himself a half dozen times. It was hard to be annoyed by so much enthusiasm and unabashed affection, so she waited patiently while he rubbed his face in her fur and only then twisted out of the hold.

“Where’s Ya-san? Is he here? Ya-san!” Naruto leapt to his feet and ran off in the direction where his nose was leading him.

Kana took the chance to catch a breath. She had missed the troublemaker, but he was best digested in smaller doses, so she gratefully shared the joy with her family. It was good to know that Naruto was well (if thinner than she would prefer); Juuji and Annai had, of course, reported to her over the course of the mission, but she still felt relieved seeing him for herself.

A minute later Naruto was running by in the opposite direction. “Haku-chan! Hey, Kana-san, d’you think he remembers me? He’s gotta, right? But three months is such a long time in the life of a tiny puppy-!”

He needn’t have worried. Kana followed him at a much more sedate pace, but she could see and hear from distance that as soon as Haku noticed Naruto, he ran out past Tsutsuji, yipping and jumping (and rolling over whenever he misjudged a landing).

Naruto threw himself to the ground, caught the puppy mid-flight and cuddled him to his chest. Haku laved Naruto’s chin with slobber, and Kana felt her breath catch yet again, this time at the sight.
They might as well have been the two happiest children in the world.

“You didn’t forget me!” Naruto cried.

Haku yipped.

Kana met Tsutsuji’s eyes over the rolling ball of their ecstatic progeny, and they both huffed. But they both also let them play.
Iruka was sitting in the grass, ignoring his book and watching children frolic in the park.

Kakashi stood still for a minute – or ten – and simply observed him. There were several tiny braids in Iruka’s hair, pulled back into the ponytail with the rest of it, so they weren’t immediately obvious.

“Maa, sensei…” he said eventually, long after Iruka had become aware of his presence, “…feeling fancy today?”

Iruka helplessly stared at him. No snappy response, no forgiving smile, just quiet wariness and trying to gauge if Kakashi was teasing or actually accusing him of something.

“Did you know if you get him drunk enough, he can’t defend his personal space so well?” Anko said, walking up and crouching next to Iruka like she had been invited to participate in their private moment. She was grinning, but there were more teeth in that grin than there should have been. “The girls like hugging him. Actually, the girls just plain like him.”

That, Kakashi recognised, was a threat. And actually a viable one. Some of Anko’s ‘girls’ were constrictors – and liked hugging more than was healthy… for anyone around – but some had venom strong enough to kill a man in seconds. And they weren’t shy about biting.

“Anko-san…” Iruka sighed.

“An-ko-san,” Iruka intoned, exasperated, but there was a shadow of a smile on his face now. Anko growled at him.

Kakashi recognised that Dove was helping him here, unexpectedly. Maybe she was only returning the favour, but the way she treated Iruka – so proprietarily that it made Kakashi grind his teeth –
indicated that they had gotten close in Kakashi’s absence.

Well. There were far, far worse friends Iruka could have made. In fact, since Anko was one of the last people Kakashi would have thought likely to befriend Iruka, it was no wonder that this happened. He was not surprised.

Perhaps a little jealous, but on the whole glad that Iruka had finally quit the self-imposed lone wolf act.

“Look,” Anko said in a lower voice, with a suddenly grave expression, “you haven’t noticed, because you’re a dipshit, but you’re going to, and I don’t want you fucking with guys that are doing their job.”

Kakashi glanced at the tree line to the right. He had noticed the ANBU there, of course, but he had thought they were on a run of the mill L&O.

“Anko-san,” Iruka said, scowling at her. “This is-”

“You’re going to hedge and fuck up the explanation. ‘sides-” She raised a finger – not that one, it was unexpectedly the index finger. “-anybody asks, you’ve got no fucking clue-” She retracted the finger. “-I am still on the detail.” She looked up and met Kakashi’s eye. “So’s Lynx and Boar, and they want Dragonfly, too.”

“Jackal?” asked Kakashi, because if Boar had been waiting for Dragonfly, there was no way he had not demanded Jackal already.

“Still in Hospital.”

That was enough information for Kakashi to fill in most of the blanks.

His plan had not worked as well as he had hoped. Not all of Root had been lured out of the village – and those that were had taken their time, too.

Kakashi’s hunt did not report any incidences of Iruka in mortal danger. Delegating did not mean they got to keep their team lead in the dark…

…and then he remembered Guruko, confessing to keeping secrets Kakashi was not going to like.

Guruko was right. Kakashi quite intensely disliked this (even as he tried to cut off the train of thought that explored what he would have done if he had known – would he have ended the mission sooner? would they have returned to the village? would it have helped?).

“They weren’t trying to kill him-”

“Yes, they were!” Iruka snapped.

“-or they’d have succeeded, but-”

“Dead hostage is a useless hostage,” Kakashi concluded.

When Iruka jumped to his feet and strode away, Kakashi let him go. Well, let him feel like he had let him go. He tracked the ANBU guard, which even technically meant that he wasn’t following Iruka.

Anko shunshined away with a true-to-character one-fingered salute when she saw that Kakashi wasn’t going to do whatever she had imagined he would do. Get pissed at Iruka for something that was Kakashi’s fault in the first place? Or try to lock him up in the apartment to keep him safe?
Kakashi would love to see anyone attempt that, provided he could stay at a safe distance and that they tried that shit far away from Konoha.

He liked having a village. Intact.

Having Iruka alive and unkidnapped was well worth weathering his anger, but even better was having Iruka alive, unkidnapped and compliant. Kakashi had this skin hunger that really, really itched.

Which, sadly, reminded him that a grudge against Bisuke of Guruko would definitely result in Iruka getting even angrier, and even less willing to be touched.

So he would swallow the bitter pill. Just this once.

x

“Naruto asked me to run an errand for him,” said Rikku, joining Kuromaru and Tsume-san halfway through their morning run. “I was wondering if you might like to come along.”

They ran fifty yards before Kuromaru spoke: “Tsume-”

“Will you be back in three days?” asked the Inuzuka Clan Head. “We’ve got that bloody A-rank-”

“Rikku-?”

“Yes,” Rikku assured him. “Might be done by tomorrow, barring complications.” He had run that distance with Naruto, Juuji and Annai in less than twelve hours. He and Kuromaru should make an even better time.

Unless they felt like going slow.

Tsume-san snorted. “Go on, partner. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t-”

“Well, there’s not a whole lot of you wouldn’t, is there?” Kuromaru barked back at her.

She just waved at them and veered off on a path leading back toward the Compound.

x

“Have you seen Rikku?”

Kana looked up from the book she was trying to use as a reference (chemistry wasn’t her strong suit), and found Pakkun standing on the threshold of her house.

“Chou, dear-”

“Yeah, yeah,” Chou ruffed amiably, crawling out of her nest of blankets and pillows. “Super secret fighting stuff. Call me when you’re done, Mum – I still want to talk about theobromine poisoning. I will develop chocolate that’s safe to eat. Hey, Pakkun-san,” she said, passing him in the doorway.

“Hello, Chou-chan,” Pakkun replied, remembering finally that such a thing as manners existed, and they were especially important to keep in front of impressionable children. “And hello, Kana,” he added ruefully in the human language.

There was a grave air around him, and Kana was immediately worried – but she had seen Naruto-kun just yesterday, and he was fine. A little tired, but that was to be expected.
Had something happened overnight?

“I haven’t seen Rikku in weeks,” Kana replied once she judged that Chou was out of earshot. “He stays on the humans’ plane almost all the time now.”

Pakkun huffed. “I guess I’ll have to go hunt him down the old-fashioned way.”

“What is happening?”

“Nothing, nothing,” he assured her. “I had a little – misunderstanding – with Kakashi. We talked it out. It’s better now. I just wanted to touch bases with Rikku.”

Kana wasn’t sure how much of the explanation she believed. Well, she was fairly sure that the bare bones of it were true, but Pakkun’s description of events was far too vague.

She placated herself with the knowledge that she had actually seen Naruto yesterday, and he was perfectly fine. Exuberant as ever, and entirely too indulgent of Tsutsuji’s smallest puppy.

“Kakashi-san is alright, too?” she asked as Pakkun shifted to leave.

“He’s getting there. Now if he could just get his head out of his butt and apologise to his mate, everything would be hunky dory.”

“If you have the chance, please tell Iruka-san that Ya and I would very much like to meet him again some time.”

“Will do,” Pakkun confirmed. “And tell Chou-chan I wish her good luck with the research. That’s Inari’s work there she’s doing, that is.”

Kana watched him amble out into the avenue and made the conscious decision not to question what ‘talking it out’ meant between individuals such as Pakkun and Kakashi-san.

x

“You didn’t have that yesterday,” Iruka observed, eyes trained on the bandage around Kakashi’s hand. “What did you do?”

Maybe Kakashi should have put a genjutsu over it – but they had those rules, like no lying at home, and no hiding their pain. All those intensely uncomfortable demands that were, in the end, the reason why their relationship worked.

If Kakashi started hiding (foolish, maybe even slightly embarrassing) fuck-ups now, they would start losing the trust. By increments, but even at that scale Kakashi would never risk it. Because when you opened the door like that you never knew what sort of enemy would stick their foot in.

“Maa,” he said, flexing the hand to demonstrate that the bones had been healed already, and the bandage was mostly there to keep him from reinjuring it when he inevitably forgot, “you should see the other guy-”

“Is the other guy a slab of granite?” Iruka demanded, with unerring instinct for Kakashi’s coping mechanisms.

“Possibly,” Kakashi allowed, startled into candidness – relative as it was – because he had been busy formulating an answer for the question ‘where did you spend the night’. Of course, being who he was – Kakashi’s contrary, obstinate life partner – did not ask that question.
“How did Anko end up braiding your hair?” Kakashi asked once the curiosity became too much and he failed to come up with a plausible scenario on his own.

Iruka self-censored for a few seconds and then said, almost lightly: “Bisuke hunted her down and talked to her. I don’t know what he told her, but she turned up at our apartment around midnight with a tin of a so-so green tea and two bottles of something that made my eyes water.” He laughed, hoarse and subdued, but not fake. “That’s the third time she tried to get me drunk. I think she’s made it into a mission or something…”

Kakashi did not need to ask why Anko thought Iruka needed to get drunk. He had been there himself, trying the same method – with varying levels of success. Iruka’s funks were not fun for anyone in the vicinity.

And this time, Kakashi might have been directly responsible for setting off one of those black moods.

He was glad Anko had salvaged the situation.

Naruto needed to talk to someone, and the Old Man had always managed to help him make sense of confusing stuff. Sometimes in ways that Naruto didn’t like, but that was life. You couldn’t like everything.

For example, Naruto didn’t like that Uzushio had been destroyed. And he especially didn’t like it when people acted like it made them happy. Or when nobody explained anything (though he was used to that part).

So, because Rikku was on a mission, Dog-taichou was pissed and Iruka-sensei was (hopefully) consoling him, Naruto decided to come hound the other adult he knew.

He was kinda worried. Dog had only smelled like that once before, and that was just after Sasuke’s Clan was killed off. Naruto had a very, very bad feeling about this – about Dog, and Rikku and Uzushio and everybody lying all the time. He just hoped he wouldn’t find out that he and Sasuke had basically the same family history.

“Hey, Old Man!” Naruto called out, entering the old-timey room deep inside the Sarutobi Clan House. It stank like tobacco in here, and that made him grin harder.

“I’m not that old, I’ll have you know,” the Old Man admonished from his cozy armchair, playfully threatening Naruto with his pipe. “Plenty of vigor in these bones.”

“I knew Tsunade would heal you up!”

“Tsunade is quite brilliant, isn’t she. Definitely going to be one of the best kunoichi in the world.”

Naruto scrunched up his nose. Tsunade was a drunken, forever angry, loud and avoidant gambler on a massive losing streak, but under that she was a Kage, one of the best medics in the world, one of the most legendary strongest ninja in the world, and nice to people who didn’t piss her off – Naruto decided that meant she was quite up there. “I think she kinda might already be that.”

The Old Man chuckled. “You always did. You always believed in her.”

“Eh-heh…” Naruto scratched at the back of his neck. That was stretching it. Granted, Naruto did think she was going to be a passable Hokage right from the start, but for a long time he really doubted that they’d manage to make her take the Hat.
He still didn’t know why she had taken it. It definitely wasn’t because she decided she wanted to. There was something she could do from the Tower than she could not have done elsewhere – but whatever it was, he had no clue.

“How is your jounin sensei doing?”

“Fine.” Naruto rolled his eyes. “I’m pretty sure that guy’s going to outlive everybody.” Except for maybe Iruka-sensei, or at least not by much. Probably for how long the revenge would take.

Naruto hoped that would never happen, but there were lying animal ninja (yes, right, he knew now they were ANBU, but he liked lying animal ninja better, since he could picture the face senbon guy would make) following Iruka-sensei around, and it wasn’t because they had nothing better to do.

Naruto was probably going to be very, very angry when he found out what that was about.

Come to think of it, Dog-taichou had probably gone volcanic in that quiet and super destructive way of his when he found out.

“The other day, I spoke with him at length,” said the Old Man, smiling. That was not exactly a normal reaction to Kakashi, unless the smile was, like, ironic. “That young man worries me quite a lot. He seems entirely too preoccupied with death.”

“He’ll be fine,” Naruto reassured him. They were ninja. Death was their main product. Sure, Dog-sensei was the kind of brittle that came with too much blood and too many losses, but he had Pack.

“He’s got people that won’t let him do anything stupid.”

“I really do hope so-”

“Sarutobi-sama…” A lady in blue scrubs appeared in the doorway. “I apologise for interrupting, but-”

“Oh, is it that time already?” the Old Man cut her off and cheerfully rose to his feet. “I’m sorry, but we’ll have to continue this chat at another time, Nawaki-kun. And tell your sensei I want to talk to him.”

“…bye.” Naruto stared after the Old Man, who let himself be steered by the medic out of the room, all the time making cheerful conversation.

That wasn’t… the Old Man. Or, he was, but he wasn’t.

Naruto blinked tears out of his eyes and walked out of the house before anybody had him kicked out. He hadn’t expected this. What had happened to Old Man Hokage? Why didn’t anybody stop it? Why didn’t anybody tell him?

He sniffled, passing the guard on the porch without even glancing her way, and walked into the street. He couldn’t look back. He wasn’t sure he could go back and see the Old Man who wasn’t the Old Man anymore. Who didn’t recognise Naruto.

And who, in Inari’s name, was Nawaki?

Tsunade left her guards posted at the ends of the otherwise empty corridor, and followed her Shadow past the Archive into the more obscure depths of the Tower’s basement.
“Why?” she demanded. This was supposed to be her tea break. There was a fresh bottle of sake waiting for her.

“Umino told Boar to look into Watanabe Omura.”

“And?”

“Nothing of any relevance,” her Shadow dismissed with a wave of hand. “An aging merchant on the verge of bankruptcy. He hoped for a commission from the Tower, but after Umino fobbed him off he let it go.”

“Financial strain—”

“Could be a motive to sell secrets, but in this case it wasn’t. It did, however, point us in this direction.”

They stood in front of a heavy door with an intimidating set of locks. Tsunade’s eyes trailed over the sealwork along the frame; as always, Mito-baa-sama’s work was impressive.

“Watanabe knew Umino through his parents,” her Shadow explained. “It turns out that the Umino and the Watanabe were all asylum seekers from Kiri. The Umino’s files are in the Archive.” As were all files of ninja who were deceased for longer than five years. “But those files start with their career as Konoha nin.”

“The naturalisation,” Tsunade concluded, beginning to understand. She set to work on opening the vault.

Foreign ninja looking to change allegiance were under close supervision for months after their acceptance into the forces. And said acceptance only came at the tail end of a hellish round of interrogations. They would be expected to provide all sorts of information about themselves, their village and their clan if they had one. The majority of the people fleeing Mist had some sort of kekkei genkai.

“Is there anything in there that would make Umino especially valuable?” she inquired.

“No. Umino is exactly what he appears to be. Not usually the type of ninja I prefer to teach, but then, I am not quite my usual self, am I?”

Tsunade looked at her double. And smirked.

The last lock snicked and the seals lit up, confirming Tsunade’s authorisation to enter. She pushed the door open.

The room was pristine and organised so impeccably it would have made the Missions Desk shinobi weep tears of rapture if they ever saw it. Files were stacked chronologically, but there was an alphabetical register, and Tsunade found Umino Ikkaku and Umino Kohari without any fuss.

The seals on their folders had been broken and then taped back together.

“Somebody has been inside,” her Shadow commented redundantly, for the sole purpose of showcasing the smugness.

Tsunade had no patience for the posturing. “No intruders were detected. Authorised personnel, then?” There were eleven people in all of Konoha with the clearance to enter this vault. All of them were high-ranking officials, in various positions ranging from the ANBU command to the Head of
Intelligence to the Hokage herself. This, Tsunade thought, looking at the pair of broken seals, was finally a tangible evidence of treachery.

“This is the closest we’ll get to a proof.”

That was what she had been afraid of. “It’s not enough.” She hated all this cloak and dagger shit – they were shinobi in their everyday life; couldn’t everybody just give it a rest in their free time and stop trying to betray everything?

What was even the point? Somebody wanted to hoard personal power? What for? So they’d have to sit in an office day-in, day-out, wearing a stupid fucking hat, dealing with stupid fucking people, until the position finally killed them?

“No,” her Shadow agreed. “He’s rooted too deeply to get him out with anything but a total salt-and-burn.”

“Then we’ll do a total salt-and-burn.”

“We can’t yet. We wouldn’t get them all. I am working on it.”

“I want it done.”

Her Shadow sneered vengefully – an expression that very much didn’t belong on Tsunade’s own face. “Not as much as I do.”

Naruto was surprised when somebody came to join him on top of his Father’s head. He thought maybe Kiba or Chouji… but the tall person that folded himself down with a quiet huff was senbon guy.

Naruto thought senbon guy didn’t like him, but you didn’t come up to people you didn’t like and sit down by them, did you?

At least, unless you wanted something.

He sighed. “Yeah?”


“I’ve been coming up here since I can remember.” Naruto had liked the Yondaime’s spiky hair when he was smaller, and then the Yondaime became his hero… He was older and knew a lot more stuff now. Sometimes he wanted to kick the guy in the butt for sealing the demon in Naruto, but mostly he just came here to trick himself into feeling like he was closer to his parents.

“I’m sorry,” said senbon guy. He stared over Konoha at nothing, with the senbon hanging downwards from his lower lip, stuck on with chakra.

“What for?”

He hadn’t been a dick, and everybody had the full right to not like somebody else.

“That you were alone. That he died like that. That I failed him—”

“Like how?”
Senbon guy seemed like he’d rather get tortured than talk about this, but he took a deep breath and opened his mouth anyway. “I was assigned to his guard detail. He shook us off and disappeared. He didn’t tell anybody what he was doing – and the next thing we knew the Kyuubi was gone and the Sandaime was telling everybody that the Yondaime’s dead. We didn’t–”

“Wait, I don’t get it.” Naruto cut him off. Sure, he knew that senbon guy was an ANBU, and had been one for long enough to be on Naruto’s guard when Naruto started using his nose. Could have been an ANBU when the Kyuubi thing happened, though he looked kinda too young.

“I failed–”

“No, no!” Naruto waved his hands. “I’ve heard everything you told me, but I still don’t get it. What should you have done?”

“Protected him!” snapped senbon guy.

What did that even mean?

“What’s that mean, though?” Naruto pointed out, shifting into a crouch so he could move around a bit.

How were you supposed to think while sitting? Your blood slowed down and didn’t even bother to go up to the brain. Your brain went all sluggish and sleepy.

“No, really,” Naruto said when senbon guy looked like he was going to argue. “It’s been more than thirteen years and it’s still eating at you.” Like fleas. “When something eats at me, I scratch at it all the time. Like, all the time.” Fleas itched.

Naruto stood on a tiptoe on the tip of the Yondaime’s strand of hair, stuck out his other leg and held the position for a moment. Then he hopped off.

“I can stop for ramen, but I scratch when I train and when I set up pranks and when I’m asleep, too, ‘cause I always end up dreaming about itching, too.” Wait, no, he had been talking about something else. Right – regrets, not fleas. “D’you keep thinking about it a lot? You gotta remember every detail of that night, right?”

“Of course…?” Senbon guy’s head swiveled to followed Naruto around from where he was sitting.

“So, you know all the ways it coulda played out,” Naruto pointed out.

These things were obvious, but sometimes you stood too close to them to see them, and then you got wrapped up in stuff that didn’t actually make sense, and needed somebody to smack you with a clue.

“You did this and that happened. Or you did that and a whole lot other stuff happened. In thirteen years you’ve got the best version figured out. What should you have done that night, senbon guy?”

Naruto didn’t actually know a whole lot of detail about what happened, but the stuff he did know… eh, if people like the Old Man or the Clan Heads couldn’t figure out a better way, then nobody stood a chance. Not fast enough, not with all the stuff they didn’t know at the time.

“Volunteered as a sacrifice myself,” senbon guy proclaimed.

Naruto rolled his eyes, but at least he didn’t laugh or anything. This was exactly what he meant about stuff people didn’t know. “Bull. You said you had no clue what he was doing, and if the guy was anything like people say he was he totally woulda tied you up and left you in the closet if you even
hinted at anything like that.”

Obviously, senbon guy already knew all of that. He didn’t look the least bit surprised, and he didn’t even try to argue.

He smelled sad, sure, but who wasn’t sad and angry about that event? At least now Naruto understood why senbon guy seemed to not like him. It wasn’t personal. It was just more Kyuubi stuff, only this time sort of upside down.

“Try again,” Naruto ordered. “And the truth this time.”

Senbon guy snorted, but then he decided to do what Naruto told him to do anyway. “…exactly what I did. Obeyed orders.”

“Yeah, figures.” Naruto stood still, and surveyed his Father’s village from the top of his Father’s big head. “Hey, senbon guy, if you decide you can stand my presence, I’d love to hear ‘bout him sometimes. People mostly don’t tell me anything. Like, they either don’t know or pretend they don’t know or didn’t really know him like Iruka or just don’t talk about anything important like Kakashi. So, I only heard a little bit about him from Pakkun-san.”

Senbon guy nodded. In the end, Naruto could see shades of Iruka-sensei in him. Guilt came in all sorts of shapes, but it smelled the same every time.

Senbon guy extended his hand. “It’s Genma, Naruto.”

Naruto shook it. “Genma, then. Even though I like senbon guy better.”

Chapter End Notes

Curious about the confrontation between Kakashi and Pakkun? Be on the lookout for Pack Pups – the next story in the series after Keep the Wolves from the Gates.

For those of you who asked for a list of guessable ANBU - I’ll try to figure something out. I will let you know in the notes.
“He came back for one day!” Kono-kun complained around a dango ball. “Just one!”

“Ew,” grumbled Moegi. “But, honestly. He came in and promised that he would stay and teach. Then he spent the whole day in his office getting caught up or something, and then he never came back.”

“It was mean,” said Udon. His shoulders were hunched like he was a turtle.

The whole team radiated disappointment.

Naruto just pushed his still half-full dango box toward them.

He had followed his nose all around Konoha until he found them plotting a rescue mission for Iruka-sensei, who had apparently mysteriously disappeared. Naruto still hoped that Iruka-sensei was shut in at home with Dog-taichou for some reaffirming, but he seized the chance to get updated on stuff he had missed.

Like that Iruka-sensei wasn’t even really a sensei anymore, apparently. He must have hated that. He had worked so hard to keep that position. Almost worked himself into the Hospital a couple of times.

“Ouch!” Kono whinged when Moegi smacked his hand. She and Udon conspired to keep Naruto’s box out of Kono’s clutches.

Dango wasn’t Naruto’s favourite, but Udon liked it, and he got to pick where they would eat when Naruto offered to treat the Konohamaru Corps, because Udon was the one who came by Naruto’s apartment twice a week to care for his plants. He deserved to stuff himself full of his favourite food.

“Was he doing Hokage stuff all the time?” Naruto wondered. That was probably the only thing that could keep Iruka-sensei away from the Academy. Other than, like, being laid up at the Hospital, but if anything like that happened then Bisuke and Guruko would either have told Kakashi, or been already skinned for rugs.

“I guess?” said Kono-kun. “I don’t go to the Tower anymore since jii-chan’s at home.”

A glum silence fell over the pre-gennin trio.

Naruto teared up and sniffled. The kids were dealing with it better than he was, it seemed. “I’ll stop by there. Talk to Tsunade.”

“Will they let you in, though?” wondered Moegi. “You’re legit ninja now, and… it’s not like it was with the Sandaime.”

There was some more silence.

Udon nibbled on the last dumpling left with his eyes trained at the top of the table.

Naruto clenched his fists. “I’m gonna make them let me in-ttebayou!”
It was their own fault. They shouldn’t have kicked Naruto out earlier.

He had done a few of the Academy kata to make sure that he could move in this new shape – just a little bit taller than Naruko, but it all moved so differently. Plus, he couldn’t exactly look where he was stepping, because the tits were in the way. So impractical.

That definitely added to his frustration, and that in turn helped sell the persona.

Naruto stormed down the Hokage Tower corridor toward the Hokage’s Office. Ninja made sure not to be in his way. A couple of chuunin actually jumped away, frightened.

As he approached the Office door, there was a movement in the shadow. With so many mixing scents Naruto couldn’t be completely sure, but he risked it: “Don’t even fucking start, Rabbit.”

The shadow stilled.

Naruto kicked the door open.

His knee and ankle hurt like crazy, but the door hit the wall, and Naruto strode in, interrupting what looked like a super heated argument between Tsunade and Tsunade. He blinked at them, remembered that he was ‘fucking annoyed’, and put on a scowl instead.

The two scowled back at him.

That was weird. Naruto’s clones had their own opinions, but if he gave them an order, they usually went ‘you suck, taichou, but fiine’. These two argued… actually, they argued exactly like Naruto meant to argue with Tsunade. This was interesting.

Naruto plopped down into a visitor’s chair, crossed his legs, and said, dry as he could: “Hi, girls.”

“I’m going to fire all the fucking ANBU, I swear,” said the Tsunade standing closer to the Desk, and therefore closer to the alcohol.

“In pine boxes,” added the Tsunade closer to the window.

They were like twins – they looked the same, but they were different. Like Annai and Chou-chan.

Rabbit stuck his head in, saw the three Tsunade and gibbered, so he was waved away and told to: “Fucking try guarding for a change.”

“Just be glad it wasn’t Jiraiya,” said presumably the real Tsunade.

The other-Tsunade shuddered, so she must have been at least passingly familiar with the old perv.

The door slammed shut behind Naruto’s back. He tried to tell himself that he wasn’t scared, but luckily both Tsunade seemed a lot more pissed at the incompetent guards than at Naruto’s successful infiltration.

“And what can we do for you… Naruto?” guessed the other-Tsunade.

“Is Iruka-sensei alright?” Naruto jumped right in. “Why hasn’t he come back to the Academy? Is he in danger?”

“More or less, and because the answer to your third question is yes,” replied the other-Tsunade with a little smile, so obviously she couldn’t be that pissed. The real-Tsunade was too busy drinking to express more than a single extended middle finger could.
Naruto had to replay the ten-second conversation in his head three times before he got the gist.

“I gave him two weeks off,” grumbled the real-Tsunade. “After that he’s going back – I’ll make it an order if he tries to argue. He’s got a fucking guard detail; he’ll be fine.”

On one hand, Naruto thought Iruka-sensei doing stuff that made him *need* a guard detail was pretty cool. On the other hand, Iruka-sensei in so much danger that he *needed* a guard detail – and that he refused to come to the Academy, because he was scared the danger would follow him to the kids – was not cool at all.

On the third hand, *Naruto* had just gotten past the Hokage’s guard detail, so that didn’t exactly fill him with confidence about guard details.

“Is that all?” asked the other-Tsunade.

Naruto cancelled his Oiroke, shrinking in the chair. Also, he uncrossed his legs, ‘cause sitting like that was weird. He shelved the topic of his Clan for a better time, and instead said: “I sort of mostly figured out that Konoha kept Gaara-” It occurred to him that maybe Tsunade wouldn’t know Gaara’s name. “-I mean, the Suna jinchuuriki-”

“Great idea!” Tsunade shouted. She leapt from the Desk, grabbed onto Naruto’s forearm and started pulling him out the door so fast he barely had the time to re-activate his Oiroke.

The other-Tsunade mockingly waved at him.

The ANBU guard outside scrambled to keep up with them.

“Wha-?” Naruto tried to pull away, but it was futile. The Hokage had him in her grasp.

“That kid refuses to talk. Jiraiya replaced his seal with something that *works*, but now that there’s no demon screaming in his head, kid’s gone mute and depressed. If you can get him to talk, I’ll give you…” She paused as she realised that she didn’t know Naruto enough to even guess at what might motivate him. “What do you want?”

“An answer,” Naruto replied. He didn’t have to think about it. “One question, one straight answer. It won’t be anything secret; it will be about you, and personal, and I won’t tell anybody if you ask me not to.”

The woman frowned. “That sounds fair enough. I’ll do that whether or not you get him to talk if you give it an honest try. Though, I’ve got no idea what there could be about me that would interest you.” Then she glared. “If it’s about underwear, I’ll give you the same answer I gave Jiraiya. His jaw didn’t heal up *that* crooked.”

Naruto grimaced. “I don’t need any more nightmares-”

She looked ready to hit him just on principle, but then she suddenly stopped. They were in front of a house that Naruto knew from passing by occasionally, but which he had never before seen open. He had thought it was abandoned, but it never fell apart, so there must have been somebody keeping an eye on it. Not too good an eye, though – the garden had grown into a jungle, and Naruto got scratched up by hawthorns as they sneaked through the narrow little pathway between the overgrown bushes to the front door.

Only once they were out of sight Naruto cancelled his Oiroke again. It wasn’t the business of random bystanders (like, for example, the Hokage’s guard detail) that Uzumaki Naruto could imitate their Hokage well enough to get to her if he put his mind to it.
Tsunade led him to a ground-level bedroom. She opened the door and beckoned him to go in first. Only she didn’t follow him; she just shut him in there.

There was a kid sitting on the bed. He didn’t look at all like a ninja. He was rake-thin and white like the fine china in the nobby teahouses. The only colour on him was the bright red of his hair, which hung almost to his chin, and partially covered his face. He smelled clean, and healthy, and too-scared for too-long.

“Hello, Gaara,” Naruto said softly. He didn’t intentionally lower his voice, but it felt like he was approaching a frightened small animal, and you had to go all soft and slow, or the animal would spook. “I’m not sure if you remember me, but I’m Naruto. I was on one of the other teams in the Chuunin Exams, but we sort of stumbled over Orochimaru early on, and then things went… weird.”

Was that a diplomatic way of saying that Gaara’s village tried to attack Naruto’s village? It had to be, right?

“Funnily enough, I met your brother and sister last month on a mission. They look… fine, mostly. Pissed, ‘cause I think they miss you-”

“Don’t.”

“Huh?”

“Don’t miss me,” the boy said in a very quiet, scratchy voice. He raised his head, and his hair fell away to reveal the rest of his face. His eyes were huge, pale blue-green, looking at Naruto like Naruto was going to put a kunai through one of them. There was an angry red tattoo spelling ‘love’ on his forehead. “Fear me. Hate me.”

“Uh… look, I don’t know what they were like with you, before, but when I met them they definitely missed you. Maybe… Dunno. Maybe they realised how important you were only after you were gone? You know, like the saying – you don’t know what you’ve got till you’ve lost it?”

Gaara stared at him like he had never heard the saying.

“D’you mind if I sit down?” Naruto gestured at the free mattress space. There was a lot of it, ‘cause it was a big bed. Two adult people could sleep there comfortably, so the small Gaara looked even smaller on it.

The boy didn’t react.

Naruto deflated. “Nah. It’s okay. You don’t want me that close to you, that’s fine. Lots of people don’t want me close to them. It comes with having a demon sealed in you-”

“You too?” Gaara breathed.

Naruto nodded and managed a smile. “Hey, I’ll sit here on the floor, okay? I’ve been out on a mission for more than three months, and it was kinda intense, so I’d really like to sit down. But I’d also like to talk. With you. ‘bout stuff. Anything in particular you’d like to hear? I’m good at talking. I can talk for hours.”

“Do…” Gaara paused. It looked like he was searching for words. “Do Temari and Kankuro really miss me?”

“Oh, boy,” Naruto started, and settled in to recount everything about the Sand Siblings that wasn’t mission-classified.
There was a huge boom. The ground shook. A cloud of blue smoke rose from the street in front of the entrance to the Council Secretariat Building.

After a moment of shock, the civilians on street level ran for shelter. Shinobi moved toward the source of the explosion. The ANBU assigned to the Secretariat landed on the stairs out front in a crouch. Another one directed roof traffic.

Koharu-sama herself appeared under the arch of the front doors.

At this very instance came a series of smaller booms. Only the windows rattled this time; one of them cracked. Clouds of coloured smoke blew outwards from the Secretariat – red from the first-floor windowsills, orange from the second, yellow from the third and green from the roof.

Every single one of the bystanders got covered with at least one colour.

The ANBU investigating the first explosion became a walking rainbow.

Iruka felt the mounting pressure in his chest ease. He smiled.

He hadn’t smiled in a long time – or so it felt – but now he couldn’t stop. He stood on the roof of the old Military Police building – now housing the offices of several organisations (Customs, Health Inspection, Civilian Law Representation) – and surveyed a job well done.

Anko, whose shift on Iruka’s guard duty had started after lunch, was standing a couple of yards away and cackling.

Lynx-san landed on the roof nearby and groaned in despair. “Umino-sama…? Why are you like this?” And then, quieter: “I thought it was just sempai…”

“Ka-ka-k-kashi g-got it from h-him!” Anko managed to force out, and then went back to cackling.

A crowd was already forming on all the roofs around.

“D-did the Phantom of Konoha reappear?” asked someone in the crowd.

“No,” Iruka refuted loudly. He didn’t want Naruto to catch flak for this, and the Phantom being Naruto wasn’t exactly a secret. “It is merely an homage.”

“Iruka-sensei?!” called out Sakura, pushing through the crowd. She seemed to be the first one other than Lynx-san who pegged him as the perpetrator. Perhaps it was her familiarity with Naruto that allowed her to see it?

“Oh, Izanagi’s flowering fields….” Ino followed her, elbowing people out of her way. She turned to Iruka with a more impressed expression than anything he had gotten from her over the two years he had spent teaching her at the Academy. “What are you on and where can I get some?”

“I… uh… I slept for full eight hours three nights in a row,” Iruka explained. “And then I had another free morning…?” Was he sorry? Not really. He probably would be – Koharu-sama disappeared from sight very swiftly after she was hit with airborne red paint, but she would definitely push for some kind of punishment.

He couldn’t really help it. His mind kept effervescing when he wasn’t exhausted. He couldn’t really calm down. This – he looked at the glorious chaos beneath his vantage point – was why he usually
He got bored easily, and the more bored he was, the poorer his impulse control became.

“If that’s how they make them in Kiri,” someone was saying under their breath, “let’s hope their civil war lasts for a long, long time. I don’t want to fight people like that.”

“Eh, Tohru, he’s just a chuunin,” protested someone else.

“Exactly. And that-” The guy called Tohru pointed at the clouds of multicoloured smoke still slowly rising above the Council’s Secretariat. “is just the result of a prank.”

Iruka decided to get out of here before someone tried to drag him to the Hokage. And, more importantly, before Konohamaru-kun arrived and finally discovered the truth behind Naruto’s respect toward Iruka.

x

Gaara slumped in the middle of Naruto’s sentence.

It was the first time Naruto had literally put someone to sleep just by talking at them. But he had checked – Gaara was breathing and everything. Just all of sudden fell unconscious.

“It’s okay,” Shizune-san assured him. “Or not okay, really, but there is a lot of damage from the previous seal, and narcolepsy is one of the effects.” She shook her head. “I don’t know how you did it.”

Naruto wondered if Gaara could even be a ninja like this. Or if he would spend the rest of his life inside this house – it was a nice house, pretty big, but still.

He let the kunoichi pull him out of the bedroom to the living room where, predictably, Tsunade was getting drunk.

It seemed like all she did was yell at people and get drunk. No wonder Kakashi refused to be Hokage.

Naruto wasn’t so sure if he still wanted to get there one day. It didn’t seem like the power to do something good and useful anymore. At least not the way she approached it. He was back to his childhood resolution: having the Will of Fire was way more important than becoming the Fire Shadow.

“I don’t know how you did it,” Shizune-san repeated under her breath, stunned. She turned to Tsunade. “Gaara-kun even talked to me, a little. I… Tsunade-sama, from what I’ve seen there are no lingering effects of the bijuu’s influence. He’s just a confused and scared little boy. Frankly, his physical and mental age seems to be vastly different.”

“I guess living with an improperly sealed blood-thirsty demon screaming in your mind would do that to you,” Tsunade deadpanned.

She might have had redeeming qualities, after all. Most people would probably assume Gaara was brain-damaged. And evil, or something.

“He’s terrified,” Naruto recounted what he learnt from the boy. “He’s lived with Shukaku all his life, and it made people hate and attack him, but it also always defended him. You’ve sealed off not just his automatic defence, but also all chakra-control. And his body’s very weak. And the one person
that always advised him on what to do is gone, too. Basically, he knows you’re enemies that his people tried to attack, and he’s at your mercy.” They probably knew all this already, or at least suspected it, but he had got the confirmation straight from the source.

“I told him we weren’t going to do anything to him,” Shizune-san despaired. “It was the first… second thing I told him.”

Naruto sighed. Gaara didn’t talk much, but the things he said… “Everyone he has ever met has lied to him. He has no reason to believe anyone, much less his captors.” Then he thought about the thing Shizune-san said before. “And, yeah, he’s like a littler kid. Littler than Kono-kun, even. It’s different for every kid, but I’d guess maybe seven?”

“My estimation was eight,” Shizune-san more-or-less agreed with him.

Naruto shrugged. “I don’t think he’s a danger to us. And I don’t really think he’d hurt himself either. But he’s locked in a room, and he’s alone all the time, when he’s never ever been alone before, and…” He shrugged again. He didn’t know how to explain this to people who had never experienced being universally hated for something they had no control over.

Shizune-san disappeared back into Gaara’s room, looking kinda too worried if the boy really was as ‘okay’ as she claimed.

“You’re off missions for a week, right?” Tsunade said thoughtfully. “Can you come by daily? I’d pull you and assign you as his co-guardian, but Hatake would probably stage a coup for half an hour to overturn the decision before he dumps the Hat back in my lap, and it’s just not worth the hassle.”

“Oh,” said Naruto.

He knew now that Sakura and Sasuke’s assignments after the dissolution of Team Seven had been Iruka-sensei’s prank (a mean one, but not totally undeserved, and Iruka-sensei couldn’t have known things would blow up like that – apparently that happened to master pranksters, too). Naruto assumed that his own placement was in retaliation for the photo. He didn’t mind, but he had thought that twitchy senbon guy – Genma – did, and Naruto accepted that Kakashi must have, too, since Iruka-sensei knew how to prank people good. And, also, obviously, Iruka-sensei knew Kakashi really good.

It hadn’t occurred to him that Dog-taichou himself picked Naruto because he wanted him.

Wow.

“What’s with that face, kid?” Tsunade demanded, staring at him weirdly.

Naruto laughed and rubbed the back of his head. “Nothing! Nothing! Sure I’ll come by! Nobody should be all alone all the time! I’ll try to get Gaara to talk to Shizune-san more, too, and maybe to somebody else – if you’ve got anyone else?”

“I’ve got me,” Tsunade pointed out.

Naruto hadn’t expected that. He had thought she would have foisted off the jinchuuriki-sitting duty on somebody else. He had a moment – absolutely crazy! – of feeling a little jealousy of Gaara, because Tsunade had moved Gaara into her own home and seemed willing to at least spend some time with him and talk to him a bit.

Why hadn’t Naruto deserved that?
But, no, he wasn’t letting this get him down. He was on a mission – to make a new friend!

“Okay,” he said. “Come by tomorrow in the afternoon if you can get away from the stuffy old people, and I’ll introduce you properly, with maximum talking. He seems to like my talking. Like it soothes him? Weird.”

But not too weird? It wasn’t like Naruto’s talking pissed off everybody.

There were Gaara and Iruka-sensei. And Dog-taichou tolerated him well enough. Rikku, too. And Juuji and Annai never minded, and Kana-san and Ya-san liked him despite it. There. Better. Now Naruto wasn’t depressing himself anymore.

“Your question?” Tsunade asked.

“Huh?”

“You said you had a personal question. You did better than expected, and you deserve an answer. So, what is it?”

“Nah, that’s okay-”

“Na-ru-to.”

“Just… I wondered…” He could still give it up and run away. But, Naruto reminded himself, he wasn’t the type to run away. He’d face this head on and find out, once and for all. “Why didn’t you want me? I mean, I get it, I’m trouble, and even without the whole demon thing I’m kinda hard to stand and-”

“Look, Naruto.” Tsunade sighed heavily, resting her forehead on her fist. “From what I’ve seen so far, there’s not a single damn thing wrong with you. Except this random fixation you’ve got on me. I’m-”

“My Godmother,” Naruto snapped, tired of this farce. “Yeah, I know.”

“Godmother?” She sat up straight and scowled at him. “Kid, where did you get that swill? I barely even knew your parents. When they were little kids.”

What?

But… “Someone who knew Raiya-ji told me that.”

Tsunade rolled her eyes. “Yeah, I’m not arguing that pervert is your Godfather. He bragged about it enough when Kushina was still pregnant. But me? No.”

Oh. So they were just very distantly related – so distantly that there weren’t any names for it. There was no family, and no clan, and Tsunade had been away from the village when Naruto was born… so why would she have cared?

“Sorry,” he said quietly. He had misjudged her. She didn’t abandon him. She never had any tie to him in the first place.

She grabbed his shoulder and shook him, so hard his teeth rattled. “I’m sorry, too, kid. This sucks all around.”

Naruto smiled. Yeah, she wasn’t that bad.
“I’m a mess,” Iruka announced with his best attempt at sheepishness as Lynx-san shoved him through the door of the apartment and slammed the door behind him. He was still bubbling with excitement.

He could hear his ANBU guard taking their places outside; one in the external corridor in front of the door, the other one sticking to the corner of the building to keep better sightlines. Incidentally, the one further out was Anko, and she had yet to stop cackling.

Lynx-san hit his head against the wall – twice – and then stilled into an alert position.

“It’s a part of your charm,” Guruko assured Iruka. “But if you sneak out again, I’ll call in reinforcements, and we’ll chew up all your shoes.”

“That’s a lot of chewing,” Buru muttered, unconvinced about the proposed course of action.

“The hunt will unite in the effort,” Bisuke assured them. “Oi, Kakashi!”

“I’m not chewing Iruka’s shoes,” Kakashi said from the kitchen.

“Of course you’re not.” Buru glared in his direction, dismayed at this betrayal of hunt unity.

(Of course he’s not,” Guruko confirmed, in a much more upbeat tone. “It’s his job to chew up Iruka-

“Aaand we’ll leave them to it,” finished Bisuke, who was a little more worried about Iruka’s moods and his capacity for pranking whoever annoyed him.

The three ninken disappeared.

Kakashi leaned backwards in his chair until his head came within Iruka’s sight, and his eye could meet Iruka’s through the doorframe. “Feeling better, dear?”

You patronising bastard, you knew exactly what I was going to do, Iruka thought. And you didn’t warn anyone.

“I love you?” he offered out loud.

He was, actually, feeling incomparably better.

x

“They gibber,” Tsunade’s Shadow reported on the afternoon’s security breach some time after midnight. “They’re terrified of you, and also used to two or more of you walking around. Another one appearing is nothing unusual.”

Right. Tsunade’s Shadow’s shadow clone was disguised as hers and, depending on how much shit she had to do on any given day, she had one to three of her own shadow clones running around. The ANBU only ever stopped them if they were concerned about their chakra output, which was why Naruto had not managed to get into the Office without even talking to anyone.

That boy had seriously impressive chakra suppression (with a bijuu in his guts he shouldn’t have been able to fake normal-human levels), but his chakra control was just so-so.

“Solution?” she asked. She knew a couple of traditional ways of minimising chances of infiltration,
but those would all add *more* exasperation to her daily life.

“Improve your relationship with your people so they don’t think you’ll hospitalise them if they stop you in the hallway. Tokens could work, but that might out me as an infiltrator. Set up verbal checks, and comply with them,” her Shadow recounted, instead of offering something out of the box (read something that would not result in raising her blood pressure even higher).

“Fuck.”

“Or keep the status quo, and deal with the intruders yourself. But the next one probably won’t be a friendly, talented little chuunin.”

“You like him!” Tsunade accused, stabbing a finger in the air in her Shadow’s direction.

In response she received a shrug and a sly smile. “What is there not to like?”

“Hands off!” she growled.

She might not have given much of a damn about that kid before, but she liked him now.


Tsunade decided that the day was over, and she could go to bed. She honestly didn’t care if somebody managed to blow up the village by morning – but hopefully Umino had it out of his system now.

---

“How?” asked Raidou, staring at what turned out not to be the horrific aftermath of an enemy infiltrator’s attack, but rather the colourful result of one of their own ninja getting a little bored.

Kakashi stashed his porn away into a pocket of his vest, and gave Raidou an ingenuous slow blink, as if he had no idea what Raidou was talking about.

“How do you deal with him?” Raidou demanded. “He’s giving me grey hair!”

Kakashi nodded gravely. “I know exactly how that goes.”

Raidou stared at Kakashi’s mess of white-grey hair for a moment, and heroically suppressed the surge of homicidal impulses.

He thought they didn’t make sense – but they made perfect sense. Kakashi and Umino-san. In very different ways, each of them was just as intractable as the other one. Raidou respected them both – yes, even Umino-san, and even in moments when he wanted to tie the man up and hide him in some cellar somewhere, to prevent him from making scenes in shops, or calling attention to his *stealth* guard, or going on *runs across forests*…

But Umino-san made Raidou’s life so much harder, and his mission damn near impossible to succeed at, and Raidou just wanted a little advice from the colleague best positioned to advise him.

Was that too much to ask for?

Apparently. Kami, how did Genma manage three months in the field with Kakashi without trying (and failing) to murder him?
Raidou spun on his heel and stepped out-

“Raidou.”

He wanted to leave in a huff, but there was a tone Kakashi used when he decided – for three seconds at a time – to be serious, and Raidou was honestly at the end of his rope. He halted and looked back over his shoulder.

Kakashi looked obviously pained even through the mask. “The only thing I discovered so far that works…”

Raidou tensed in anticipation.

“…is talking to him.”

Walking away in despair, Raidou’s expression was probably just as pained as Kakashi’s had been. *Talking, To Umino-san.* To Umino-san, who had just *sabotaged the Council Secretariat for kicks.*

That sounded like a form of torture nobody had thought to train the ANBU to resist.

x

“They’ll never let me out of Konoha again, will they?” Iruka lamented. He was not yet ready to accept the cage as his fate, but he was already moving out of the angry stage. The grudge remained his to nurture, but active anger was simply too exhausting to keep up.

“They might if you start blowing up strategic targets,” Kakashi pointed out, climbing into the bed to join Iruka.

“I didn’t blow it up. But it is an idea.” Iruka sighed. “I’d be less pissed if keeping me trapped inside the village actually did keep me from being assassinated.”

Kakashi’s arms came around him – partly in reassurance, but mostly because they had been apart for too long, separated first by obligations, then by hurt and fear.

Iruka sat up and, with quivering fingers, took off his t-shirt.

Kakashi’s breath hitched ever so quietly.

His fingers traced the seal carved over Iruka’s shoulder blade.

Iruka had expected this moment, of course, and would just like to have it over and done with. He knew the result was far from pretty – some people’s seals looked like decorations, but his was more like someone had used him as target for shurikenjutsu.

“Reverse-summoning,” he explained. Possibly Kakashi had discerned as much, but Iruka honestly thought Kakashi wasn’t significantly better than him at seals (if at all), and Iruka himself had needed a lot of explanation before he understood how it worked. In fact, Hokage no Kage-sama seemed to be impressed that Iruka managed to learn it, rather than just learn how to use it.

“Good,” Kakashi decided eventually.

Iruka sighed in relief. He should have had more faith in Kakashi’s pragmatism.

“Location?”
“I don’t know.”

There was the expected moment of incredulous silence, before Kakashi repeated, flatly: “You don’t know.”

“The alternative was the Hokage’s Office, but Hokage-sama said this was safer,” Iruka explained. He had been naturally doubtful, but let himself be convinced – after all, the Council had access to the Office. Wherever this unknown space was, Iruka had been assured that no Council member could get in.

“You trust her,” ventured Kakashi.

That was a very interesting dilemma. Did Iruka trust Tsunade-sama? Well, obviously, in the general sense. He accepted her as his leader, and believed that she had Konoha’s best interests at heart.

But when it came to Iruka’s personal well-being, he had a lot more faith in Hokage no Kage-sama’s vested interest in him.

He shrugged.

Kakashi remained silent. Disapproving, obviously, but aware that at this moment in time he could not do anything to improve the situation. No doubt he would come up with a plan. Later.

He kissed Iruka’s neck and pulled him closer. “Okay?”

Better than okay. However, there were still many ways to improve upon the evening.

“How about pant’s off,” Iruka ordered, and moved to divest himself of his own.

Chapter End Notes

I have, after a lot of soul-searching, decided not to confirm or deny any guesses about the Shadow’s identity, until one of the POV characters (other than Tsunade) finds out.

I will, however, confirm or deny guesses about the ANBU's identity. I am at a con, so I simply don’t have the capacity to come up with a list at the moment; sorry, folks - I will get to it when I get back home.
Chapter Notes

I’m home from con, more or less dead, totally ready to fall face-first into bed. Nonetheless, have a chapter.

Good night.

Sakura was focused on neatly transcribing the code to the label on the sample bottle when Aya-sempai nudged her. “Is that your ex-teammate? Introduce me!”

Sakura’s heart skipped a beat as she sought out Sasuke-kun-

But, of course, Sasuke-kun wasn’t here. Sasuke-kun was far, far away from Konoha, training to become stronger without his team holding him back.

“What?” She tried to follow Aya-sempai’s line of sight out of the window. It took her a moment to realise who she was looking at. “Naruto?”

“Naruto, huh?” Aya-sempai repeated. Her expression went a little predatory.

“…why?” Sakura asked stupidly. She knew it was stupid, and she of course understood why Aya-sempai was asking for an introduction, but not why. Naruto wasn’t as useless as Sakura had always assumed, but he was still… Naruto.

“I’ve seen him around, sometimes with kids. He’s cute and nice! How many cute and nice boys do you think there are? I’ll give you hint: not many.”

Sakura opened her mouth to argue, and then had to shut it when she failed to think of a single example. But she didn’t think Naruto qualified either.

“I don’t think Naruto’s really all that nice,” Sakura pointed out. She remembered being called ‘the Flea’, and she also remembered Naruto’s nickname for Sasuke-kun, which was even worse. Granted, they had been sort of mean to Naruto first, but Naruto was just so annoying… “And you definitely need glasses.”

Aya-sempai huffed. “You don’t have to agree with me. Just introduce me. And while all the other girls run after the cool and mysterious bad-boys, I’ll catch myself a nice one. Then I’ll be deliriously joyful, and you all will come to me to complain about your neglectful husbands. Ha!”

_Husband?!_ Inner screeched. _He’s thirteen, you blind harpy, and also a human-shaped headache!_

Right at this moment Aya-sempai didn’t seem all that smart to Sakura. Except that while they were discussing boys, Aya had managed to finish the re-labelling _and_ had the blood samples sorted and ready for a trained medic nin to start processing.

Sakura had barely finished deciphering the appalling handwriting on the original labels of her samples.
She huffed. “Whatever. If it’s that important to you, I’ll introduce you to him.”

“Thank you! What’s he like? Tell me something about him?”

“…he’s a dog person.”

These were probably the last summer-like days this year, so it was no wonder that everyone who was not busy with their duties had come out. There was not a single training field empty, the park was crawling with people, and even the Hokage Mountain was unusually busy.

Asuma and Kurenai ended up retreating to the Sarutobi gardens for some peace and quiet. And privacy. These days, Asuma thought glumly, it wasn’t that difficult to dodge his Father.

“This is nice,” Kurenai admitted, lying in a patch of sunlight with her eyes closed. “It’s been a while since we had a chance to do nothing for a while.”

“Gennin teams are a lot of hard work,” he agreed. “I’m getting a third kid, finally.”

“Who? Do you know?”

“I got a file.” Asuma sighed and fished out a cigarette. He needed one whenever he thought of his new gennin. “Some weird special case. The name is Sai.” And it is a cover, probably, Asuma didn’t add. He could read between the lines, and if he didn’t have the clearance to see his student’s mission history, that meant someone had used the kid for some ugly shit, and the Hokage – or the Council – covered it up.

Same shit, different day. Sai would inevitably turn out to be a headcase, and Asuma already had a black mark from how Uchiha Sasuke had cracked while under his supervision.

Kurenai sighed. “I really hoped they would give you Sakura. But apparently two girls on a team are just too much.”

And here Asuma had been so relaxed. Hopefully Kurenai would not explain her stance on team assignments to him for the fourth time; he agreed with her. He was just as powerless as she was when it came to making other people see her point. “I know you wanted to keep teaching Sakura.” If the girl were assigned to Team Ten, Kurenai would have comfortable access to her.

“She is too busy with the Hospital. I offered, but she did not seem interested in specialising in genjutsu.”

“Pity.”

Kurenai shifted and curled up against his side. “I care more that she has found something to learn that fulfills her, than who she learns from. Besides, Shino will be a devastating genjutsu user, so I do not lack for a student.”

“I’m glad then,” Asuma concluded, very deliberately not reminding Kurenai that her motivation had initially been to show up Kakashi. There was no way to spin that into anything positive, for either Kakashi or Kurenai – or Asuma himself.

Better to let sleeping dogs lie.

Or join them. Asuma did feel like taking a nap.
Naruto’s hunt was drying out after a run and a swim. The sun was hot and hard at work, so Naruto’s pants were barely even moist by the time they hit the park, and Sakura came up – for the second time ever – to willingly greet Naruto and talk to him.

Was it the chuunin vest? It had to be the chuunin vest. And Naruto wasn’t even wearing it. Wow.

“Hi,” said the girl Sakura had been hanging out with. “I’m Akimichi Aya.”

“Hi, Aya-san. I’m Naruto,” he replied, taking a – discreet – sniff and guessing that they probably studied together. He was glad Sakura hadn’t ended up all alone – and maybe this time she’d learn how to be nice to someone.

“Want to go out for ice cream?” suggested Sakura’s friend.

Naruto grinned. “We’re actually headed that way right now. Come with us! Oh, hey guys-”

“Yuck,” Haku-chan grumbled at the kunoichi’s smell.

“That’s the Hospital,” Juuji explained to him before Naruto could. “It means Aya-san’s a healer.”

Haku ran along quietly for a few steps, and then said: “Yuck.”

Naruto snorted. “Lots of things that don’t smell good are good for you. You’ve got to learn what the different smells mean.”

“It’s the disinfectant, right?” Sakura guessed.

“Mostly,” Naruto agreed. And for Haku-chan it probably was. For Naruto the worst part of it was the sickness and pain under those chemicals. Bile and blood and suffering. “Human noses are sorta blind, or deaf – I don’t know what the right word is for when you can’t smell-”

“Anosmia,” said Sakura’s friend.

“-so you can fool them by slapping a loud smell on something, and they don’t notice the rest.”

“Like perfume,” she noted. “Or those air-fresheners in bathrooms.”

Naruto nodded. “Just like that. Only, doggy noses don’t get fooled so easy. They still smell the loud smell and the quieter smells, so the result is just yuck.”

“Yuck!” Haku-chan echoed happily, and launched himself into Naruto’s arms.

Naruto caught him, cuddled him close, and then had to start dodging and weaving when all his huntmates tried to jump into his arms, too, and he didn’t have enough arms to catch everybody.

“Oblivious,” the medic grumbled glumly.

The Flea frowned. “Not really. Actually, Naruto mostly notices even stuff other people miss…?”

“Oh. So, I was politely rejected?”

Anai nudged Juuji’s side, and they shared a grin. Their big brother wasn’t so much oblivious, as he
had been distracted, and he barely even noticed the medic. He had so easily agreed to include her in the ice cream expedition because he shelved her as the Flea’s friend.

“This is gonna be interesting,” Annai said quietly, as they slunk off to pile up on Naruto.

“Why?” Juuji didn’t think so. “She accepted defeat. She won’t try again.”

“Nah, but others will.”

“What others?” Juuji demanded. Who even thought they were good enough for his bro? It better not be the Flea-

“The one with the flowers,” Annai said sagely, before she jumped at Naruto’s back.

Naruto dodged.

Juuji tried to trip him, but Naruto flipped over to his hands, and landed easily in a crouch. “The loud one?”

“The loud what?” Naruto asked, confused, but down to play.

“Nah, the quiet one,” Annai said, and leapt back into the fray.

They won and wrestled Naruto to the ground, though mostly because Naruto was protecting Haku-chan from getting squished, so he only had three limbs against Juuji and Annai’s eight.

An excited bark was all the warning they had before Akamaru landed on top of them.

Neji watched in stupefied disbelief as the wrestling ball of dogs and Naruto-san fell apart, Naruto-san split into two, and one of them transformed into a dragon. A dragon formed of *ramen ingredients*. There were noodles waving around its form, and root vegetable spikes, scallion eyes; there were shrimps and kelp, menma and nori, egg and kamaboko…

Neji blinked.

The thing didn’t disappear. It was now chasing the dogs around.

“…a ramen dragon…” his companion breathed, forgetting the seal she had been perfecting and staring at the spectacle.

“Tenten…?” Neji swallowed. “That is stupid, is it not.”

“I don’t know about stupid, but it’s definitely silly.” She was grinning. The absurdity of it, then, was apparently not enough to offset the amusement value.

That reassured Neji somewhat. Still, he found himself straining to understand what was happening to him.

He had known himself to be an excellent fighter. He was always prepared for defeat, provided that his enemy were greatly experienced (akin to his Clan Head) or possessed a great power (similarly to that gennin from Suna, who crushed enemies to death with sand)… or if they used the seal put on Neji when he was but a babe (and incapable of defending himself yet).

But Naruto-san had none of that; simply through the use of superior strategy and tactics, and a wider
array of techniques, he had even made his victory over Neji look effortless. And here he was, acting so childishly, unembarrassed to be witnessed by a wide audience. He seemed so unabashedly cheerful. Carefree and warm – all aspects that Neji had been taught to associate with weakness.

Another thing Neji had been taught to associate with weakness was affection.

He was not entirely certain whether he was using the term ‘endearing’ in the right context, for he had never before considered using it for anything. Much less anyone.

He rose to his feet, nodded at his teammate in farewell and set out on a walk. These epiphanies required time and solitude to digest-

“Neji!”

He paused and looked back.

“Who are you kidding?” Tenten demanded. And although Neji had steeled himself for ridicule, she only rolled her eyes – which he had recently discovered was a gesture of exasperation rather than dismissal.

Tenten cast another brief glance at Naruto-san – who was presently aiding his ninken with mounting a counter-attack against the ramen dragon – and then turned back to Neji.

This was a side-effect of his recent struggles which Neji had not expected. Where his previous aloofness, lack of interest in his teammates and his deterministic beliefs had been read as arrogance, his current uncertainty and clumsy attempts at forging understanding inspired Tenten to take an interest in him. She had learnt to read him within weeks.

It was aggravating. Neji wished to keep his thoughts to himself. And, much as he liked to believe that Tenten was simply that skilled at interpreting people, he could not shake the notion that he was that transparent.

He was… the same as Hinata-sama. The awakening came much later for him, but once he had noticed Naruto-san, it was impossible to stop noticing him. The way Neji behaved… exactly the same as his cousin.

Embarrassing. Obvious.

“Tenten?” he said. There was a question hanging in the air between them but, try as he might, Neji could not seem to find the right wording. Tenten now wielded power over him – not quite comparable with the seal, but devastating nonetheless.

Tenten rolled her eyes again and made a motion in front of her mouth, which Neji tentatively decided was supposed to mime zipping.

Was it weakness, Neji wondered, to have power and choose not to use it?

Was it weakness to put personal bonds above personal goals?

Just like Hinata-sama before, Tenten was offering him friendship. This time Neji understood the meaning of her offer, and did not hesitate to accept it.

He lowered his head and spoke, sincerely: “Thank you.”
It was Haku who finally scored more than a glancing bite, and got the dragon clone to pop.

Everyone – from Sakura’s friend and Sakura to Naruto’s hunt to Akamaru – heaped appreciation on Haku-chan, who almost floated, he was so excited. He had killed the mighty dragon!

Naruto’s face ached from laughing so much.

Kiba chucked Naruto’s shoulder, and then dropped to one knee to heap similar compliments – except mocking – onto Aka-chan.

Aka-chan growled. Kiba’s hold on him was firm and he couldn’t get away, so he looked up to meet Naruto’s eye with a long-suffering expression and let out a soft: “Arooo.”

Naruto looked around and noticed their audience. The park was full – little kids, older kids, civilians and ninja all mixed up – and a lot of them had been watching the Great Battle Against the Fearsome Ramen Dragon.

“Sunface,” Juuji said, “I think half of this village wants to lick you.”

Naruto shuddered.

He was very glad that he couldn’t smell any of their individual smells; it was enough to see the looks on some of their faces. Sakura’s medic friend, for example, looked like she had just seen Sasuke covered in chocolate.

“Um, if my choice is between this and being hated by everyone…” Naruto paused. He honestly wasn’t sure.

Now he had even more pity for Sasuke.

The one thing that Naruto felt deep gratefulness for was that his admirers were far less bothersome than Sasuke’s fans had been. Maybe it happened because they were all older now, but Naruto suspected that it came down to quality.

His fans were just a lot cooler than Sasuke’s had been.

He waved at Hinata-chan, who went pink and shuffled closer to Shino. Kiba joined them a moment later, with Akamaru nipping at his heels.

“Ice cream?” Naruto asked.

“Finally!” grumbled Sakura, but she couldn’t fool him. She, too, had had fun watching the Great Battle.

x

Iruka came to open the door expecting to find Lynx-san on the other side.

It was not Lynx-san.

“Sensei!” the trio yelled – loud and high-pitched – immediately activating Iruka’s teacher mindset. It was just like being in class, only he was wearing a pair of sweatpants and yesterday’s t-shirt. In fact, now that he had checked, it turned out he was wearing Kakashi’s yesterday’s t-shirt, because he had not intended to meet anyone today, so he had grabbed the first thing from the floor.

He was glad he was even wearing a t-shirt at this point. And that there weren’t any weird stains.
“Konohamaru… Moegi… Udon… what are you doing here?!” It was just before noon – weren’t they supposed to be at school? Or was it Saturday already? Iruka didn’t dare ask for fear of revealing to the children just how badly he had checked out.

In the better case they would spread the information like a great joke; in a worse one they would be concerned for him.

“D’you know how long it took us to find you, sensei?!” whined Konohamaru-kun, and tried to sneak into the apartment under Iruka’s arm.

Iruka might have been feeling pathetic and not up to dealing with another assassination, but he could manage three schoolchildren just fine (and his ANBU guard could stop suppressing his laughter; Iruka knew exactly what was going on behind that mask).

Konohamaru-kun was picked off the floor and dumped outside in the corridor.

“You’ve got a dog?!” Moegi exclaimed shrilly. “He’s so cute, Iruka-sensei! What’s his name?!”

And of course Bisuke had come out when he heard kids. Of course he did.

“Your address is not listed,” Udon informed Iruka with comically serious reproach.

“You still found it,” Iruka pointed out, with the implied demand to be informed how. And it had better not be Naruto’s doing, or he would find some way of making Naruto regret it very much. Naruto knew that Iruka valued his privacy.

And his address was listed as a box at the Missions Desk, the way paranoid jounin and secretive ANBU agents listed theirs, because they didn’t want anyone to be able to find them. Iruka had been advised to arrange it by a paranoid jounin and a secretive ANBU (also known as teenage Kakashi).

In between Konohamaru making another attempt at sneaking in and Moegi just diving for Bisuke, Iruka had his arms full trying to defend the old homestead, which was currently an unholy mess that he had intended to tidy up today, and definitely wasn’t ready for guests, much less young and impressionable ones.

“Our!” Iruka snapped.

They ducked and cringed, expecting the Big-Head jutsu.

Iruka took a moment to devise the least terrible resolution to this situation, and then relented with a sigh. “Bisuke, please come keep these three company. I’ll be out in five minutes, and we’re going to get lunch.”

“Yip,” Bisuke deadpanned, shoulder-checking Iruka’s calf as he passed by straight into Moegi’s effusively appreciative hands.

Konohamaru was on his knees and petting a moment later.

As Iruka was closing the door, he glimpsed Udon leaning over to scratch an ear. He shook his head and turned around.

Guruko was standing there and watching, amused by his huntmate’s antics. “He’s such a slut.”

Bisuke was. But, and Iruka felt like this was rather the more important point, Bisuke used it to get
things done. And at that he was very, very good.

…it only occurred to Iruka now that maybe leaving Bisuke alone with Konohamaru and his cronies wasn’t the wisest idea.

He reached record speed getting ready.

“To the park, please, sensei?” Moegi begged shamelessly, and then fell upon Guruko, who, being a faithful guard, followed Iruka out.

“I thought you were hungry,” Iruka pointed out. That was a sure bet. Kids that age were always hungry, and ninja kids twice as much.

“We can get something from a stall!” Konohamaru wheedled.

“Bisuke wants to play,” Udon added, as if this was supposed to be a persuasive argument.

Iruka found himself faced with five pairs of puppy dog eyes. And he could resist that, too – he burnt with the Will of Fire – but, honestly, he woke up today intending to maybe clean up the apartment and then go to sleep again. Nobody short of attacking ninja could expect him to exert any kind of effort.

“…fine.”

x

In Guruko’s not-so-humble opinion, Kakashi was voluntarily spending way too much time at the Hokage Tower for somebody that claimed he wasn’t interested in administration or community leadership.

Kakashi insisted that he was just a ‘subversive control freak’.

Problem was, Guruko knew Iruka pretty well, so he could tell a subversive control freak at the first sniff. And Kakashi was not one.

“We miss you, Iruka-sensei,” whinged the girl.

“That’s right, Iruka-sensei!” added one of the boys. “You’ve got to come back!”

The other boy grabbed onto Iruka’s t-shirt. “Please don’t leave us with Fune-face, please, please-”

“My can’t – I’m sorry-”

“But you promised!” chorused the children, almost in unison.

“Iruka-sensei is not the kind of person who breaks promises,” added the leader-boy.

Guruko was impressed. They were brutal. And, unless he was mistaken, coached by Naruto.

They were hundred percent genuine in their wish to have Iruka teach them again, and they missed him authentically, but there was an artfulness to the way they presented their arguments (and pleas) that kids of nine or thereabouts shouldn’t possess.

Naruto probably shouldn’t yet have been capable of such manipulation either, but he had been coached by Ya-sensei, and he also had wagonloads of natural charisma. Honestly, Naruto probably just thought of what he would have done in the kids’ place, and described it to them.
“Crying pity he’s never gonna give us a pup,” Bisuke mumbled – and even that was a risk, because if Iruka was listening, he definitely heard that.

They had all given up on Kakashi a long time ago, and when Iruka became an institution in the life of their hunt, that was it for pups. On the other hand, they were all Pack Pups. It made sense if their human members were adopted, too.

“What’s Naruto, then?” Guruko suggested.

This time he was sure Iruka heard, even over the clamour of the three children hanging onto him, even over the noise of the park they were entering. And, boy, was it full of people!

“Iruka-sensei!” called out a familiar voice.

Iruka’s former students stampeded over. Within seconds, the man himself was surrounded by teens and preteens on all sides.

Guruko wondered how this was less of a danger to the children than teaching at the Academy would have been, and came to the conclusion that it wasn’t. On the train of that idea came another one: so that was what Kakashi was doing at the Hokage Tower.

Guruko doubted that Kakashi would manage to sniff out more than he and Bisuke did, but more power to him.

“Mooching off your sensei?” Naruto’s voice said once most of the graduated ninja began to disperse. “Sensei, at least make sure you feed them something healthy!”

“Ew,” protested the boys.

“If any vendor around here sells anything like that,” replied Iruka, “rather than just sweet or grilled things.”

“I think I saw some kakiage back that way?” offered Sakura. “It’s still fried, but at least there’s vegetable?”

Naruto laughed. “You should make them scavenge for food, Iruka-sensei-”

“Now that sounds like an interesting lesson plan,” Iruka cut him off, and while the kids cheered at the implicit promise that he would return to the Academy to teach, he added: “And stop calling me that. We are family, aren’t we, otouto?”

There was a moment of silence, before the kids exploded into a cacophony of yelling.

Naruto, poor pup, looked perplexed.

Iruka blinked, faux-innocent.

“Definitely heard us,” Bisuke decided.

“Nii-chan?” Naruto said experimentally.

He had no clue what was the point of the prank, or who was even being pranked at the moment, but he was happy to play along with Iruka-sensei.
“Do we call you nii-chan, too?” inquired Annai.

That gave Iruka-sensei a bit of a pause – clearly he, too, was flying by the seat of his pants here – but then he shrugged like ‘what the heck’, and grinned. “I would be honoured, Annai-chan, Juuji-kun.”

“Yip!”

“And Haku-chan, of course,” Iruka-sensei added. “If you’re certain, and if Kana-san and Ya-san won’t mind…”?

…and sensei was name-dropping. That only worked on Guruko and Bisuke, so obviously Dog-taichou’s hunt was the target. Naruto was super happy to help Iruka-sensei prank Dog-taichou.

He grinned and said, right in time with his dog-siblings: “Nii-chan!”

x

“Two yakitori, please,” Kuromaru ordered at a stall that had passed the sniff-test.

Rikku took the opportunity to stretch. His spine popped in three different places. Times were, he could have run for days and forgotten all about it after a good night’s sleep. He was old.

The proprietor leaned over the counter and frowned when he didn’t discover a short human standing there. Then it dawned on him that a dog had just talked to him. He needed a while to deal with the revelation – obviously he was new around these parts – whereupon he said: “And I suppose you can pay for it.”

Kuromaru rose on his hindlegs and placed a pawful of notes on top of the counter.

The proprietor needed another – shorter – while to come to terms with this development. Then he straightened up and reached for a paper plate. “Of course, okyaku-san, right away.”

Kuromaru and Rikku ate their portions, disposed of their rubbish in the bin, and walked away, hearing behind them grumbled: “Go to the effing ninja village, Daiki. The profits will be effing worth it, Daiki. Right, Mum.”

Kuromaru chuffed a laughter. Rikku joined him a moment later.

Sadly, they didn’t have a chance to enjoy their moment.

With but a bark of warning Akamaru-kun launched himself into the air and flew over the heads of a family sitting on a park bench. One of the toddlers let go of his ice cream in fright, and it dropped right onto his sister’s dress.

“Slow down!” called out Akamaru-kun’s partner, who fell behind because he ran around groups of people rather than through. “What’s so- Oh, hey, Kuromaru.”

Akamaru-kun pressed his nose into Kuromaru’s throat, as if they hadn’t seen one another in months rather than days. Honestly, puppies.

“Oi,” Kuromaru grumbled fondly and shouldered the youngster away.

Akamaru-kun wasn’t the least bit deterred. Wagging his tail, he pranced over to Rikku and pressed his nose to Rikku’s throat.

Rikku wasn’t sure how to react. Naruto was the only one who had done something similar to him
in… well, in what felt like a lifetime. Juuji and Annai were up for piles, but they didn’t look up to him this way – they had their parents and extended family.

“Ha-ha,” he grumbled at Kuromaru, who wasn’t even trying to disguise how amusing he found this.

Rikku gently batted the pup with his tail, which, it seemed, made Akamaru-kun even happier.

And, naturally, Akamaru-kun’s entire team witnessed the scene.

The bug-user remained tacitly in the background, but the kunoichi greeted Kuromaru like an old acquaintance and bowed to Rikku. “You are Naruto’s friend, right, ninken-san?”

“It’s Rikku, kunoichi-san,” he replied, resigned to far more socialising than he had planned on when he agreed to grab a late lunch with Kuromaru.

“Oh. Um. Hyuuga Hinata. It is an honour to meet you.” She bowed again. “Ano… We should go. We shouldn’t interrupt your date-”

“Date?!” exclaimed Tsume’s pup, freezing and looking back over his shoulder, as if he expected some scandalous public display of affection, but his teammates grabbed him and dragged him away.

Kuromaru huffed. “He comes by it honestly. Believe it or not, at his age Tsume was twice as bad.”

Rikku was too old and too mangled to get even more bent out of shape about putting a label on his relationship. “I don’t mind if you don’t.”

Kuromaru shoulder-checked him, and followed the loudest yelling toward the part of the park where Rikku’s hunt were making a spectacle of themselves.

The rest of Naruto’s hunt returned home, dog-tired – ha! – but Rikku said goodbye to Kuromaru-san and insisted on accompanying Naruto.

Naruto bought a bunch of grilled chicken wings on the way to the apartment, and that went a long way toward making Rikku content. But even before that, Rikku had seemed lighter. Lighter than Naruto ever remembered him being, but totally incomparable to how he had been after the event with Dog-taichou.

Naruto was fascinated. Somehow Kuromaru-san had lit up Rikku’s eye just by being.

It was sort of… beautiful to watch. Not that Naruto was watching. Just… aware. He really, really hoped that it would work out for them, ’cause they just seemed so (quietly) happy about it.

“Here,” Rikku said once Naruto shut the door behind them and kicked off his sandals.

‘Honoured Naruko-sama,’ the writing went, ‘this one hopes that this letter finds you in a good disposition.

‘With the dog days of summer upon us, we await the turning of the wind safely ensconced in our shelter. Your friend, this one is glad to say, enjoys good health. His spirits seem to have lifted since he last had the pleasure of your esteemed company.

‘Please, do convey this one’s greetings to the noble sirs who have brought your letter to this one.'
‘Humbly, your servant, Natsuko’

Naruto laughed with relief. So, Sasuke was alright, working for the perverted Sage and guarded by the one person who would literally cut through whole clans to ensure his safety.

Rikku huffed. “You have got the strangest contacts, partner.”

“This was a good idea, Ino,” Shikamaru muttered. He smirked at the crash from the other room. That sounded like a box falling over, but the walls didn’t shake, so it was probably just one of those full of clothes. Ino had a lot of clothes for a girl who wore basically the same thing every day.

Ino bounded over. “What did you just say?!”

Chouji sighed. “Do you have to do this all the time?”

“Did you hear what he said?!” Ino demanded, rounding on Chouji, whose hands were busy with cleaning vegetables. She didn’t mind that he was holding a weapon. Not that it would have worked as an effective deterrent, because Ino was Ino, and she knew Chouji would have stuck that knife into himself before he let it come anywhere near her.

Chouji sighed again. “He complimented you-”

“He only compliments me to get a rise out of me!”

Ino was right, of course, but that didn’t mean Shikamaru didn’t appreciate the comfort and relative safety of a place his Mother could not invade at a whim. People left him alone when he was here; except Ino, but he was used to Ino, and she let him wind her up for diversion, so this was a win. Even when she made him help move furniture.

He could use his shadows for the furniture moving. And Chouji insisted on feeding them excellent food. Net win.

“Look on the bright side,” Chouji advised. “At least Shikamaru doesn’t call you- mmph.”

Shikamaru opened an eye to check that Chouji was still alive. He was fine; there was just half a cucumber stuck in his mouth.

“Trouble with the new teammate?” Shikamaru inquired. He very much regretted his promotion, for a variety of reasons. More duties, working with his Mother, traipsing all over the countries, low-key pissing off the Hokage – and the whole debacle with Uchiha, which would have happened to some other team, if only Shikamaru had climbed a tree in the Forest of Death and refused to come down until the allotted five days were over.

So much cloud-watching time, lost to his laziness. Honestly, the only reason they rushed through the second part of the Chuunin Exams was Ino refusing to stay in the wild longer than necessary, and Shikamaru had gone along with it because it would have been too troublesome to argue with her-

“He calls Ino beautiful,” Chouji reported, after he had returned the cucumber to Ino, who promptly wiped it into Chouji’s shirt.

Shikamaru quirked an eyebrow. “Sounds right up Ino’s alley.”

“Che,” Ino grumbled. “I’m pretty sure he’s being sarcastic. But I can’t prove it!”
Shikamaru raised the other eyebrow, too. “And that’s why you’re paranoid, and now take everything even vaguely complimentary anybody tells you as an insult…?”

“No!” Ino snapped.

“Yes,” whispered Chouji, and raised a hand to block the repeat advance of the cucumber.

“You know what you have to do, then,” Shikamaru concluded. He shrugged and rolled to his other side to get rid of the pins and needles in his arm.

“I can’t stop being beautiful!” Ino protested. “And I can’t shut him up without Asuma-sensei getting all butt-hurt about it, because what if Sai becomes another Sasuke – and they already look so alike-”

“I think Shika meant you should talk to him,” Chouji cut in.

Shikamaru had not meant that at all. But in his long career as a reductionist and optimaliser he had discovered an interesting facet to people. It’s enough to suggest that you know the answer to their questions; their own conceit would drive them to figure it out themselves just to show you they were just as smart.

“Hm,” Ino considered. “I did manage to unintentionally drive one guy to desertion and a life of crime in exile. I’m pretty sure I can repeat the effect – quicker this time. I’ll have to read up on some stuff… huh…” She shuffled off back to her bedroom, and started pulling books out of boxes.

“Ah, crap,” Chouji muttered very, very quietly.

Shikamaru pretended to be asleep. It was better than watching the first spark of the fire that was going to burn down the world. Whose idea was it to introduce Ino to the concept of psychological warfare?
“Nee-chan!” Naruto exclaimed enthusiastically, accosting Anko with a hug as soon as she appeared in the training field.

She accepted the affectionate assault without bringing anything sharp or pointy into it. If for no other reason than to freak out the guest lecturer, with whom she had finally managed to coordinate free shifts. Rewarding as Iruka often made it, bodyguarding was still a huge logistical headache.

“This is Yuugao,” she said, stabbing her finger in between Naruto’s wrist tendons to get him to let go. “She’s—”

“Cat,” the boy announced, hopping away into a relatively safe distance.

Yuugao-chan scowled. Her hand landed on the hilt of her tanto. “Excuse me—”

“Don’t do that, puppy-chan,” Anko spoke over her. Mediating was an even worse headache than bodyguarding. Why were all ninja – Naruto and Ibiki excepting – so fucking high-strung? “You’re *not supposed* to know that shit. Someone will send you down to T&I one of these days—”

“They won’t,” Naruto assured her, “cause the Hokage knows that I know, her sha-*right hand* knows that I know, and maybe one of these days the ANBU will wise up and stop letting their identities hang out for anyone to pick up on. Honestly, I could name, like, a quarter of them off the top of my head, with masks and everything. Nii-chan’s got to compartmentalise *very hard* to consciously stop himself from figuring out who they are.”

Anko adored the little bastard. It wasn’t fair. How was he so awesome?

“Sorry, Yuugao-san,” Naruto tacked on cheekily, “but it’s the truth.”

“Enhanced senses,” Yuugao said grimly.

Naruto gave her a cheerful thumb-up. “You’re the first one that’s figured that out point-blank! Cool!”

Anko’s neck cracked, so fast did she turn her head to gape at him. “You’ve got *what*?!”

Yuugao continued scowling. “I am going to take that to Falcon.”

“Good.” Naruto nodded repeatedly. “I’ve only been pointing the opsec fail out for, like, two years.”

Yuugao scowled some more. Then she sighed and relented. She closed her eyes and made the ‘praying for patience’ expression that was usually inspired by either Anko or Aoba (who had a bit of a competition about who could get more of them). “You are a walking headache.”

Fair, although, in Anko’s opinion, Naruto ranked way below bodyguarding in intensity.

Naruto unrepentantly grinned. “And proud of it.” He edged closer to Yuugao and offered his right hand – the left one sported a set of vicious claws. “But, honestly, it’s very nice to meet you *properly*, Yuugao-san.”

“Just Yuugao.” She shook Naruto’s hand.

Anko breathed a little more easily – up until this moment she hadn’t been *entirely* sure that Yuugao could get over the Kyuubi thing. Especially since Naruto had a vulpine streak a mile wide. It had
nothing to do with the demon, the kid was just naturally like that, but it probably didn’t help people
differentiate between the two.

But, since they were fine, Anko was going to ask the chibi to summon Annai-chan for her, and make a bitches’ day of it.

Yuugao’s eyes fell to Naruto’s left hand. “I’ve heard you’re trying to mix neko-te with taijutsu. Honestly, why not just get a tekagi-shuko? But show me what you’ve got.”

“Sure,” the boy agreed. “But, you know, I’d like to learn how to use it in the traditional style, too-”

“You know it’s a woman’s weapon, right?” Yuugao pointed out mildly. She meant a seductor’s weapon.

Naruto raised his right hand in a seal. Anko knew what was coming, so she could brace herself (and not drool) as Naruko-chan appeared in front of her, all porcelain skin, flowing hair, a slightly risqué shift to her kimono and a spark of utter filthiness in her eyes.

“So I do, kunoichi-sama,” Naruko-chan muttered. She caught her lower lip between her teeth for a moment and then released it, leaving the tell-tale imprint of teeth to slowly fade. “Nonetheless, this one wishes to learn the art of murder.”

“What the hell?” deadpanned Yuugao, gaping at the stupidly beautiful, faux-demure courtesan in front of her.

Anko laughed, and forcefully reminded herself that Naruto-chan was not quite fourteen yet. “Yup. He does that.”

x

“Tell me about our regular customers,” Natsuko ordered, stacking the clean glasses in the overhead cabinet.

Sasuke would have liked to obey, but he did not understand. “What about them?”

“Everything,” Natsuko replied. The last two glasses went up onto the shelf. She closed the cabinet door with a soft squeak of hinges. “Anything you have noticed and remembered.” She turned around, leaned back against the counter, and made herself comfortable.

Sasuke struggled not to flush under her intense observation. He understood now – he was being tested on his observation and retention of data. Of course this would be part of intelligence gathering.

He wished this had occurred to him earlier.

“Tachibana Shin,” he started, since that was the most obvious name. “Possibly shortened given name, but everybody calls him that. Eats late supper here two to three times a week on his way home to Fujino-Cho. He’s a farmer of some sort-”

“Bee-keeper,” Natsuko corrected him. “That’s why he makes so many trips into the woods around, so it’s convenient for him to stop here.”

Sasuke hung his head. Now that she mentioned it, he recalled a discussion about the price of honey.

“Go on,” she said, without any sign of approval or disapproval.

“He lives alone.” Which was one of the reasons why he ate out. “There is a woman in…
Tsutsujima? Either mistress, or he’s courting her?” Sasuke wasn’t sure what the difference was. If there was any at all. The man had spoken of her with emotion, but Sasuke was not familiar enough with romance to judge. All he knew was that this wasn’t a one-sided obsession.

He, unfortunately, knew what that looked like very well.

“No other family-”

“There is an estranged uncle and cousins,” Natsuko cut in. “But he does not mention them, so that is a reasonable assumption. His financial situation?”

Sasuke shrugged. How was he supposed to know that? Nobody ever taught him how to spy on people, and he wasn’t interested in their boring civilian lives. He was surprised that he even retained this much, but washing dishes and carting bowls around was so mind-numbing that he had had to find something to occupy himself with.

Natsuko nodded, more to herself than to Sasuke. “Aokabi Rae is Shinnousuke’s fiancée. He has finally saved enough money that he can afford to marry…”

Sasuke swallowed his questions and listened. He still didn’t see why all this was important, but he was being taught an enormous amount about how things worked, how people related to each other – and could be used against one another. All sorts of conventions and interpersonal relationships that nobody had ever explained to him before.

It wouldn’t make him any stronger, but knowing when and where to strike might be just as useful, no? If Jiraiya kept being useless, Sasuke would have to find that man on his own.

With that in mind, he shut up and learnt.

x

Shizune-san bought dango for them and ruffled both their hair as she walked out of the room.

Naruto and Gaara stared after her, although probably not for the same reason.

Gaara wasn’t used to being touched, and mostly the prospect scared him.

Naruto wasn’t used to being touched by people he hadn’t known for a long time, who didn’t have a reason to care for him.

Shizune-san just did it.

“She’s kinda special,” Naruto said quietly.

Gaara nodded. He inspected the dango, and set up two places at the writing desk under the window. They had to sit shoulder to shoulder, and sometimes they bumped elbows, but it was okay.

And the dango was tasty.

“I’ve found your picture from the Chuunin Exams,” Naruto said once the dumplings were gone, and Gaara was studiously wiping sauce off his plate with his fingertips, and then licking them.

“Mine?”

Naruto pulled the photo out of his pocket and handed it over. It’d get a bit sticky, probably… but it was just sauce. Worse sticky stains were left over all sorts of official documents.
Naruto didn’t have a great memory for details unless he specifically paid attention to them. At that stage of the Exams, Naruto had been focusing on other things, so he barely even remembered Gaara (until the meeting with Temari and Kankuro reminded him). He had the vague idea that there had been even less talking and a lot of KI.

Anyway, now he could at least tell why this mousey, locked-up guy didn’t really look all that much like himself.

Gaara stared at the picture. Not at himself. At his siblings.

After a while he tentatively gave it back.

“You can keep it if you want?” Naruto offered. He had technically stolen it, but Tsunade had seen him fish it out of the box of intel sent up by the T&I (and kept in the corner of the Office until she felt like doing something with it), and she didn’t say anything about it, so he guessed it was technically made legal by the Hokage’s approval.

Gaara hesitated again, and then took the picture back. He stared at it for another moment, then whispered a ‘thank you’ and hid it away in the drawer of his bedside.

“So,” Naruto went back to what he wanted to ask originally, “d’you want me to get you some eye-liner and nail polish? I’ve shopped for that before, so if you tell me what you want, I could get it. Kana-san had declared that using the Oiroke for make-up was cheating, and also that it wouldn’t work in every situation, so Naruto had had to learn to do it all for real, too. Naruto hated how that stuff felt on his face, but he could put it on properly, and he could mostly remember not to touch his face while it was on.

“Oh,” said Gaara, reaching up to trace his index finger along his eyelid. He pulled his hand away and examined the pad of the finger. It was clean. “I forgot.”

“It seemed like it might be important to you, so I thought I’d offer-”

“I would like that,” Gaara confirmed. “But I have no money. And I am not sure I am allowed a mirror.”

“Don’t worry about the money.” Naruto had just finished a three-month-long A-rank, and Tsunade was paying him for spending time with Gaara, which he would have done anyway. “Friends give each other presents; this will be my treat, okay? And I’ll talk to Tsunade. I don’t think you could do anything with a mirror that you can’t do with the window, so it should be fine.”

“I do not want to hurt myself,” Gaara assured him.

“That’s good.” Naruto wanted to hug him, but Gaara wasn’t up to hugging yet, so he – slowly – patted his shoulder. “If you start, tell somebody. I’ll try to be here, but if I’m out on a mission, Shizune-san’s really very nice. She’s just… a little shy.”

Gaara gathered the dishes onto a little pile, like he was pointing out that he knew Shizune-san was nice. It took him a minute to tear his eyes away from it. “She was kind to me. In the beginning. I thought it was a trap.”

“She’s pretty much always like that,” Naruto assured him. But, yeah, he knew how unreal – how fake and threatening – it could seem when somebody acted nice. Especially if Gaara didn’t have a nose that could warn him when people were lying. “Now Tsunade – she’s got a temper. Don’t make her mad. She’ll yell.”
“…yell?”

“Yeah, I know yelling’s fine, so long as she wouldn’t actually hurt you. But it doesn’t feel good anyway.” More than that, Tsunade might have been nice and unwilling to hurt Gaara, but she was still keeping him locked up. She had reasons, but those had nothing to do with Gaara personally.

She was in complete control of Gaara. You wouldn’t want to make a person in control of you mad.

“I always make people angry,” Gaara said sadly. “I do not have to do anything. It is enough that I am.”

“And, again, I know exactly what you mean.” Except that Gaara used to also gorily kill a lot of people just because they were around, so the angry terror some people felt was kinda warranted in his case. Not the point, though. “But this won’t work on Tsunade. ‘cause she understands how sealing works, so she knows you’re not the demon, and it is not you, and that hurting one won’t hurt the other.”

“That is right.” Gaara’s mouth stretched into a wan but genuine smile. “If she killed me, Shukaku would be free to destroy everything.”

And on that cheerful note, Naruto pulled out a pack of cards and offered to teach Gaara how to play Go Fish.

x

“I am glad you decided to stay, after all,” Natsuko said, half-smiling at Sasuke with blood-stained lips.

She coughed again.

Sasuke handed her a clean handkerchief, took the bloody one from her and added it to the rest of their laundry. This had been the worst coughing fit he had ever witnessed. She had sounded like she was drowning.

“Might have to sleep sitting up,” she muttered. There were tears of exhaustion and pain gathering in the corners of her eyes.

Sasuke wished she would wipe them away. They were making him angry.

“Go back to sleep,” she told him.

As if he could. He was by now used to her nightmares or bouts of coughing waking him up, and could easily fall asleep again after she settled. She was not settling now. And Sasuke was, frankly, scared.

What if she left the room to avoid waking him up again? What if she did choke, somewhere outside, where he wouldn’t find her until it was too late?

He shook his head. “Shut up.”

She tried to raise an eyebrow, but in her exhaustion that had no effect.

If she wanted to say stupid crap, Sasuke was going to suspend his respect and tell her what he really thought. “I stayed here because of you, and you know it. Let’s not pretend I didn’t mean to leave this place as soon as possible.”
“Why?” she croaked.

“Because nothing I have – nothing I care about – is safe. Before I start building a life that’s worth living, I have to destroy the threat. I have to… kill that man.” Stated like that, it even made sense.

Everyone (except the stalkers whom he’d prefer to forget) from his classmates to his teachers to Kakashi to the damn Hokage scoffed and rolled their eyes at Sasuke when he stated his goal to kill that man. Because, like an idiot, with desperate pride, he had proclaimed that he was going to do it to avenge his Clan.

And he was. But if he had said from the start that he was trying to protect himself, how differently would they have treated him?

Stupid.

“Oh?” Natsuko spoke, with no trace of amusement or patronisation, proving Sasuke’s hypothesis about being taken seriously. “Is that why you train so hard?”

“Yes. He is an extremely powerful shinobi and I… it is my duty.” It was Sasuke’s duty not just to avenge his Clan, but also to ensure that no other families would be destroyed for an association with him.

“You must love him very much-”

“What?!” he snapped. Where did she get that?!! “No! I despise that man!”

“Do you?” She blinked, and one of the tears trickled down her face, over her cheekbone and the pronounced hollow beneath it to the sharp line of her jaw. “Despite everything he has done, Tomiokun, you still follow his instructions to the letter-”

How did she know?! Did the Sannin tell her everything about Sasuke?! How did he know?!

“-and what else but genuine love could inspire such devotion?” A cough wrecked her entire frame; she pressed the new handkerchief to her mouth.

Sasuke’s heartbeat thundered in his ears. He rose to his feet without it registering until afterwards. With fists clenched tightly and yearning to punch something, he opened his mouth to shout at the woman-

-and closed it.

Because she was right. Because she was right and Sasuke was some kind of an idiot, blindly following that man’s instructions, because he had always, ever since he remembered, followed that man’s instructions, hung onto his every word, intrinsically believed him to know everything and have the answer to every question and just waiting for Sasuke to grow up before he shared the secrets of the universe.

How had Sasuke never realised it?!

He was a child, blindly clinging to the delusion that his parental figure was invulnerable and infallible – and that man had always been his primary parental figure.

And Sasuke wanted him dead despite the bone-deep knowledge that nothing could ever hurt that man.
... so... what was he doing...?

“I am so sorry, Tomio-kun,” Natsuko said, while the second tear trickled down. “I didn’t mean for my words to hurt you so.”

“No,” Sasuke replied, shaking his head, “I needed to hear that. I needed to – to realise that there was a fundamental flaw in my strategy. I will do better from now on.”

“Yes?” She gave one of her half-smiles even as her eyes closed, and she slumped back against the wall. “Good to know, Tomio-kun.”

x

“Anything you didn’t want to tell Nara?” Tsunade asked once she and Jiraiya remained alone.

Getting the ANBU out of the Office had become twice the hassle it used to be since Naruto unintentionally gave them a complex, but at least Falcon didn’t have the temerity to voice doubts about Tunade’s ability to take care of herself. So, faced with the implicit offer to defeat Tsunade in a fight and thus prove she needed the protection, the collective ANBU had backed down.

It did lift her spirits considerably.

Which was Jiraiya’s only saving grace – otherwise she would not have been nearly as patient with his specific brand of humour.

“Heaps,” Jiraiya admitted and swallowed, since he was treating himself to Tsunade’s uneaten dinner. “But if I told you, then what would you need me for?”

Unfortunately for him, he was leaning down over her shoulder to get at the take-out carton. The uninvited physical proximity, the entitlement and the refusal to treat her with even a semblance of respect jointly blew past the limits of Tsunade’s patience.

She directed a tiny bit of chakra to her index finger and gave Jiraiya’s stomach two quick pokes.

He looked down – probably to check that he hadn’t pissed himself. Tsunade had done that to pests in the past, and Jiraiya had been the most frequent recipient of that treatment, since proportional response to some of his stunts would have maimed him permanently. Even as a teenager Tsunade knew how to exercise restraint... at least as long as Hiruzen-sensei was there to give her disappointed frowns.

At this time, however, a pool of urine on her office floor would be something she had to deal with, and she didn’t feel like dealing with any of Jiraiya’s bodily products. Ever.

“Hic.” Jiraiya blinked, comically startled.

“Just take the whole carton,” she told him. If he tried another smooth move on her, she was going to maim him. “And while you’re at it, remind me: what do I need you for now?”

“So cruel,” he muttered, but he did remove himself from her immediate reach. “I’m try-hic-ing to figure out the Ame – hic – situation, but it’s look-hic-ing increasingly like war. And Ame has a private army – hic – of S-class nukenin, so that’s going to – hic – be a shitshow.”

“You told all of that to Nara,” Tsunade reminded him. “I was there. I do listen-”

“My agent’s – hic – not going to last long,” Jiraiya admitted. “I may have to go in myself.”
“No!” Tsunade snapped. She should have fucking punched him. “What exactly do you imagine I’ll
do if you get yourself offed? Just build up an entire new web of contacts in between all the other shit
I’m doing?”

“Hime-”

“Don’t fucking start. If you kick it before you’ve trained a successor, Grand Uncle will personally
turn you into fishfood in the afterlife. You will spend eternity as plankton.”

Jiraiya blinked at her. “Sometimes I forget. Beautiful and – hic – terrifying-”

“Are you going to say anything worth hearing, or can I go home?”

Jiraiya sighed. Ten additional years appeared on his face just like that. “I thought I’d – hic – train
Naruto for it, but…”

Tsunade endorsed the pick in theory – Naruto showed a lot of promise in infiltration, intel gathering
and sabotage (too much, perhaps, judging by the size of the grudge the collective ANBU was
nursing) – but she had seen the devastation in the boy’s expression when he asked why Tsunade
didn’t want him.

The only reason why he even asked, she was sure, was because of the way she had treated him since
their first meeting. Like a talented, annoying young ninja who knew far too much for someone of his
age and rank. Which was exactly who he was.

But Jiraiya – Jiraiya had tried so hard to impress Naruto that he had overshot and came across as a
self-aggrandising egomaniac who was always on the lookout for new fans.

It could have worked. If Naruto hadn’t already known that Jiraiya was his Godfather.

Tragically, from Naruto’s point of view Jiraiya was simply a man too obsessed with his own
greatness to care about a child entrusted to him.

“Hic.”

Tsunade sighed. “Would you say you want to help Naruto become stronger?”

“Yes – hic – of course!”

Now for the difficult question: “And which part is the more important one? Helping Naruto become
stronger, or the you part?’

Jiraiya scowled. He obviously wanted to protest the accusation, but he wasn’t wholly incapable of
accepting criticism. Once someone hit him over the head hard enough, he tended to miraculously
rediscover the concept of self-refection.

He slumped. “…you – hic – sound like Orochi-hic-maru.”

Tsunade gritted her teeth. Did she? Well maybe there was more than one reason for that. “You know
what? In this instance, I’m taking that as a compliment. He might have turned into…” She shook her
head and waved her hand in front of her face, as though she was trying to disperse a stinking cloud.
“But on many, many points he had been right.”

And they had failed him so hard she felt like all those dead children in those laboratories were
partially on her conscience, too.
If she had stayed, Orochimaru would not have become *that*. She would not have let him.


Tsunade relented, mostly because listening to him was starting to give her a headache.

She beckoned him closer. With three fingers touching his abdomen and a little chakra she unlocked the nerves.

“Naruto’s not alone,” she reminded him. “And if you want to have a relationship with him, start *working* on it. Don’t just assume that you’re automatically entitled to his affection and whinge when he doesn’t give it to you.”
Sasuke read the letter twice. Its alleged writer was Natsuko’s ailing Mother, and it sounded like a lot of small talk interspersed with a report on their chickens, pig and a vegetable garden.

Natsuko watched him try and parse the message.

“Rainy days?” he read. There had been no rain in weeks. They were expecting a lot of it within the next few days. At the latest once October started.

Natsuko shrugged. “I thought it was too obvious, but Jiraiya has more experience, and weather is ubiquitous enough that most people tend to skip over it when reading letters. Rain references Ame-”

“Hn,” Sasuke commented, unable to help himself.

Natsuko huffed a quiet laughter. “Yes, quite. You will find it mostly rains where my Mother lives.”

That, at least, made sense. Fujino-Cho was about a third of the way from Konoha to the borders of the Land of Rain. Those borders had been closed for years, so if Natsuko had a way of getting inside, her frequent weeks-long reconnaissance trips would fit into the picture he was forming. As would the respect Jiraiya had for her: there probably wasn’t any other agent who could do her work.

Additionally, it explained why she continued spying despite her declining health.

“Will you let me see what you write back?” he asked.

Natsuko nodded. “I think I’ll return within the week with some interesting news. Possibly as soon as the day after tomorrow. We can work on it together.”

Sasuke watched her, startled, until she gave him a quizzical look. He admitted: “…I didn’t notice when you left.”

Her confusion gave way to amusement. “It seems that there are still a few tricks I can teach you.”

Sasuke was willing to learn anything she would offer.

“If you are interested, I could teach you to fight with a fan in addition to the wire,” she suggested.

When Sasuke thought ‘anything’, he hadn’t considered skills like this… but after a short contemplation he came to the conclusion that even the use of an unconventional weapon was included in ‘anything’.

“You mean… a gunbai uchiwa?” Like Uchiha Madara’s? “How did you learn-?”

“No,” she cut him off. “A tessen. It is more of a kunoichi weapon, I know. Not big and impressive… unless you are the Kazekage’s daughter. But ordinarily the point of a tessen is that it does not look like a weapon, and still can open a man’s jugular in a flick of your wrist.”

“I am not a kunoichi,” Sasuke pointed out.

Natsuko merely shrugged. “As you wish, Tomio-kun.”
“Wait,” he said when she moved to stand. He hadn’t meant it as a rejection of her offer. He was just – recalibrating. “A lot of kunoichi techniques are focused on fighting stronger opponents, aren’t they?”

Natsuko relaxed. “Yes. A traditional kunoichi’s chief weapon is surprise, even though nowadays the trend of equal opportunity means that girls have less interest in these arts and prefer the big and destructive things.”

“Like the Kazekage’s daughter.”

“Quite. I prefer the inconspicuous and unexpected.”

Not learning to get stronger, but learning to overcome a gap of strength between himself and his enemy through a particular skill. Sasuke had never thought of going around the obstacle rather than through to get to his goal, but wasn’t that what a real shinobi should do? Sasuke was not interested in proving to that man that Sasuke was stronger. No, that was what that man wanted.

In the past, that man’s was the only guidance Sasuke had, so he believed in it. He became an avenger – and forgot to be a ninja. He nurtured his hatred – and missed out on opportunities by estranging people who would have otherwise been helpful. Naruto was right. He had been self-sabotaging by following that man’s instructions.

Now Sasuke just wanted to see him dead. And if he could achieve that by opening his throat unexpectedly with the edge of a fan, Sasuke would have been satisfied.

x

Ino declared that she was finally moved in and ready for guests.

Apparently, Chouji and Shikamaru didn’t count as guests, and that one time Sakura had stopped by she was officially work-force. Granted, aside from the kitchen – which, it seemed, Chouji had taken over as his own space – the apartment had been a mass of boxes arranged around Ino’s field bedroll.

Now it looked… well, like an apartment.

Sakura hadn’t been in Ino’s room at the Yamanaka Clan House in years, so she expected that her new place would look different from what she remembered. Still, it wasn’t really anything like what she imagined.

“Did you mind-body switch us at some point without me noticing?” she asked before she could even consider censoring herself.

There were books and scrolls. More books and scrolls than there had ever been in Sakura’s room at any one time. It was as though Ino had left behind most of her games and decorations and accessories, and replaced them with half a library. There was a bookcase with double-lined shelves, but most of the texts were stored in piles and stacks all over the desk, the floor, the windowsill and the top of the wardrobe.

The floor-length mirror had survived the purge, but had been moved so that if you opened the door it would cover it.

Only the vanity had been moved here and left in a prominent spot, preserved like the memorial of Ino’s time with her Mother that it was.

“It’s the worst!” Ino complained dramatically, and spread herself over the bed, one forearm covering
her eyes. “When I got pissed I stole some of Dad’s stuff. I thought maybe there’d be something about…” She sighed. “But instead I discovered weaponised psychology. I’m in love, Sakura. This is it – this is the one and only for me.”

On closer examination, Sakura confirmed that most of the book titles referenced psychology and related fields, with the entirely expected emphasis on interrogation and conversion.

She blinked a couple of times. Wow. This was – this was Ino’s future.

They had always been just two girls, but in this room she was suddenly seeing the adult Ino – the lethal kunoichi who would smile at you in just the right way to get you to believe in whatever she was telling you. Ino was working hard, and maybe there weren’t any loud and flashy techniques involved, but she wouldn’t need them.

In a few years Ino would be able hand a loud and flashy shinobi poison and get him to thank her for it before he drank it.

“Wow,” she said out loud.

“Should have known the one thing that would impress you would be turning into a bookworm,” Ino whined. “Why-oh-why has this happened to someone as beautiful as me?”

Sakura grinned. “Don’t worry, piggy. Unless you invite everyone in here, nobody can tell that you suddenly grew a brain.” Which was true. Ino masqueraded as an airhead, and she was damn good at it.

“Promise?” the manipulative blonde pleaded, letting her arm down to utilise her wide, wet eyes to their greatest potential.

Sakura felt a stirring of pity in her stomach, and she knew she was being conned.

“You promised me a bonding session,” Sakura pointed out. She let herself be suckered into this exercise for the promise of chocolate and friendship; she hadn’t signed up to be the test subject for Ino’s experiments.

Ino sat up, leaned down and activated a seal on the underside of her bed frame. She straightened with a hardcover notebook in her hands, a purple one with floral patterns around the edges, and offered it for Sakura to take. “I want you to read my diary.”

“No.” Sakura took a step back. She wanted to be friends, but this? This was not okay. She didn’t want to know what Ino really thought about any number of subjects. That was far too much bonding.

“Yes,” insisted the darn demon girl, winking conspiratorially. “Go ahead, Forehead.”

What kind of creepy voyeuristic shit is this? demanded inner Sakura, while the outer one reluctantly accepted the notebook and cracked it open.

She peripherally noticed as Ino lay back down, reached up over her head and blindly yet with absolute certainly picked a bonbon from a box on top of a book pile. She popped the chocolate into her mouth and, judging by the way her jaw didn’t move at all, let it melt on her tongue.

Sakura got to the third page before she realised what she was reading. When Ino said ‘diary’, she wasn’t talking about an actual diary, as in an account of her daily activities or lot of purple prose about her feelings and fantasies (especially ones of marrying Sasuke and becoming Uchiha-sama and birthing a brood of scowling, cool babies). This wasn’t a diary. It was a treatise – it was a whole
book of notes and cross-references and hypothesis on the mental state of Ino’s closest acquaintances, and since her crush had started out as genuine as anything, Sakura was presently reading about what made Uchiha Sasuke tick.

And it wasn’t any of the ‘too cool’ or ‘enigmatic’ crap. It was the real thing, revised and re-revised as Ino’s point of view shifted closer to objective over time.

Not voyeuristic, she mused, but it’s still creepy shit.

*Well, so is Sasuke,* pointed out Inner.

Shut up! Sakura mentally snapped at herself.

And read.

x

“Hop, hop, little rabbit!” Anko called out, a moment before an explosion shook the training ground.

Iruka stopped at the tree line and watched as Naruto’s shadow clone dispersed. Naruto himself dropped down from the canopy, and returned to trying to stab Anko with a cat-clawed hand. It was clear that he had not had a chance to practice with it much since he got it – he was telegraphing his movements in the effort not to scratch himself.

Anko barraged him with shuriken and the occasional exploding tag.

Iruka would have been worried, except that they both seemed entirely too happy.

“How did this happen?” complained Lynx-san from the shadows behind Iruka. “That boy – taught by that woman…”

Iruka grinned. It probably wasn’t a well-adjusted reaction, but both he and Naruto had experienced a lot of loneliness, and finally finding friends was a happy occasion. If Lynx-san didn’t like it, he was welcome to piss off.

Naruto used the opportunity Anko gave him by insulting him, planted his unclawed hand on the ground and kicked out.

She dodged instead of blocking, and thus gave Naruto the chance to swipe his cat-paw at her throat. The tip of one of the claws caught the edge of Anko’s mesh shirt and sliced across her collarbone.

Anko finished jumping away and checked on the wound. It was just a scratch, but it bled enough. “Oooh, nice,” she commented when her fingers came away stained red. “Which poison?”

Naruto huffed. “They’re not poisoned. We’re *sparring*.”

“Lightweight!” Anko retorted, licking her blood off her finger. “Good one, though. With the right neurotoxin, you could have killed me!”

She sounded honestly cheerful about it, and Iruka was once again struck by how weird the people he liked best were – and the people who liked him best.

“Sempai’s family,” Lynx-san reminded himself, still apparently unaware that Iruka could actually hear every grumbled word of his.

They were, weren’t they? Iruka mused, stepping out of the trees now that Anko and Naruto had
paused in their training. They were what passed for family, when each one of them had been left otherwise alone in the world.

Kakashi, Iruka, Anko, Naruto, every member of Kakashi’s hunt, and even Lynx-san himself, it seemed.

“No attack dogs today?” Anko asked in lieu of a greeting.

“I distracted Bisuke with petting children, and Guruko’s at the vet,” Iruka replied. The truth sounded more like Konohamaru Corps had skipped school again and Iruka tasked Bisuke with making them go to class, while Guruko had accepted a dare to an eating contest from Iruka and lost. With predictable consequences.

Because Iruka cheated, but that was neither here nor there.

“Hey, hey!” Naruto yelled, hopping excitedly. “Are we plotting? Is that why you escaped from Dog’s hunt? You haven’t explained the prank yet-”

“No prank, Naruto,” Iruka replied. He sighed – and reflexively plucked a seal out of Anko’s hand, momentarily forgetting that he wasn’t in fact in class, and she wasn’t going to put that under her classmate’s desk. Oops.

“Right.” Naruto’s face fell. “Sure, yeah. What’s up, then, sensei? Oh, did you want to talk to Anko-nee? I’ll make myself-”

“Don’t do that!” Iruka snapped. He grabbed the boy and pulled him closer.

This was – odd. He had never done anything like this before. Once, a long time ago, he had watched this child be ganged upon and mocked; back then he went down on one knee and put his hands on Naruto’s shoulders. Like a stranger promising that there was someone willing to protect Naruto from malice.

Now he wasn’t a stranger. But if he wanted to be family, he would have to articulate that, and not just off-handedly, or make a joke of it. How did he even get here? Or, perhaps the question was, how could he have hated this boy once? What kind of monster was grief, anyway?

He blinked tears out of his eyes. “I mean it. I’d like to be your aniki.”

Naruto’s fists tightened on Iruka’s vest.

After a moment, Naruto nodded into his chest.

Iruka met Anko’s eye over the top of his little brother’s head.

Anko theatrically – but not dishonestly – wiped a tear from the corner of her eye. “Aww, cute boys being cute. Now I just gotta add my little protégé, and this will be one hell of an adorable huddle.”

“You have a-”

“We should spar sometimes,” Naruto cut Iruka off, once again better informed about what was happening. “Or – I mean, is he holding a grudge?”

Anko cackled; her eyes glinted with recreational evil. “The perfect opposite, methinks.”

Naruto pulled away from Iruka, blinking in confusion. Then his expression cleared. “Oh, Inari, tell me he doesn’t-”
“He’s never been a talker, and when he starts to talk, it’s not about taijutsu techniques or social injustice. Nope. Two words, kid,” Anko said mock-solemnly. “Ramen. Dragon.”

Right. Even Iruka had heard that story. He had no clue of the context here – somehow Anko and Naruto managed to communicate right over his head.

Naruto’s face flushed pink. He wanted to cover it with his hands, but the cat’s paw got in the way. “We were just having fun! Haku-chan loved it!”

Anko mockingly shook her head. “You’re too cute for your own good.”

Iruka laughed, too, even though he suspected that this was yet going to have consequences.

“Oi, Lynx!” Anko called out. “Isn’t he too cute?”

Lynx-san leaned out of the shadow just to show Anko the finger, which she cheerfully returned.

Naruto just waved in the ANBU’s direction, and stuck his tongue out at Anko. “Ugh, I don’t have to take this. Nii-chan, come spar with me!”

It took Iruka a moment to realise that he was being addressed. Then a spot of warmth bloomed somewhere under his collarbone, and he found himself agreeing even though he hadn’t come here to train. He had just wanted to share the news.

Speaking of. “I wanted to tell you that I am going back to the Academy,” he said, shucking his vest. He jumped on the spot, rotated his joints and stretched a bit. He wasn’t nearly warm enough, and Naruto wouldn’t hold back, he was sure.

This was going to hurt; but it would do him some good, he was sure.

“Aww,” Anko grumbled. “And here I thought Lynx and I could lure you to the dark side.”

Iruka knew for a fact that he wouldn’t survive ANBU – even aside from his fighting skills not meeting the requirements, the restrictions on behaviour would drain him of the will to live. Besides, he knew that Anko was just making fun of him.

“Nii-chan would be wasted in ANBU,” Naruto said, idly tossing one of Anko’s shuriken back at her.

“I am happy being a teacher,” Iruka assured them before they started arguing and possibly transitioned into a free-for-all spar. He definitely wasn’t ready for going up against Anko. “Tsunade-sama.”

Actually, it was Hokage no Kage-sama.

“-updated the security, and also made it an order. So, otouto, please, if you would be so kind and call off the Konohamaru Corps, I would be very grateful-”

Naruto just laughed at him. So did Anko.

So did Lynx-san.

Iruka sighed – and attacked.
Sasuke let Natsuko’s shadow clone take over, nodded to Tsujimoto-san in passing, and went up the stairs to change for training.

There was someone in their room. He extracted a knife – not a kunai, since that would apparently be immediately suspicious – from under his oversized yukata, and crept upstairs.

He heard coughing. Familiar coughing.

When he opened the door, Natsuko – presumably the real one – was sitting on the bed and hacking her lungs out into a handkerchief.

Sasuke stashed his knife away and went to pour her some of the ginger tea. With honey that she bought from Tachibana.

The tea helped her as much as it ever did. She remained pale, but even so refused to dispel the clone, arguing that she would have to go down and work her shift if the clone wasn’t there. When Sasuke offered to take the shift himself, she dismissed his suggestion out of hand.

Once they arrived at their clearing, she presented him with a small paper bag. “Happy birthday.”

“It’s not my birthday-”

“It is Tomio-kun’s birthday.”

“Hn?”

“I picked it,” she replied winsomely. “Is there any argument against it?”

Sasuke shrugged. There probably wasn’t. He had no particular feelings about late September, and Natsuko usually had a reason for doing the things she did.

This time the reason appeared to be that she had a gift for him.

Sasuke peered into the bag and found a tessen inside. He flicked it open. It went more smoothly than he expected; its edge glinted in the sunlight. He stared at it, attempting to formulate a response.

How long had it been since anyone had given him a gift? He couldn’t remember. What was the expected reaction?

“Thank you?” he chanced.

Natsuko hesitated and then, slowly, leaned in to press a brief kiss to Sasuke’s forehead, so soft that he barely felt it. “You are welcome.”

Blood rushed to his face.

She did not mock him for the reaction. Instead, she moved straight on to teaching. “Adjust your grip—yes, exactly. Now, you can use it in any state from closed to open, so the first thing you should learn is how to instinctively open it exactly as far as you want to.”

Sasuke tried. The tessen shot fully shut – it was all he could do to hold onto it, and even that was with the help of chakra.

Natsuko half-smiled. “Slow down. And soften. Feel the spokes? Try—”

Sasuke listened and wondered at how different it was to learn from someone else. How much
Natsuko’s presence and advice helped, when he was so used to having to figure out everything by himself, by trial and error.

His life in Konoha seemed so far removed as if it was a different lifetime altogether, but looking at Natsuko as she moved through a kata and corrected Sasuke’s stances with cold but gentle hands, Sasuke thought about the last moments of Team Seven. Possibly the only moments when Team Seven acted like a team.

Sasuke had told Naruto that Naruto was his best friend. He had meant it, in that moment of horror. Naruto had shone a little light into the darkness and set Sasuke off on a road that neither of them could expect would lead here – to this place.

Now Sasuke had a real friend. It was only thanks to Natsuko that he could see in hindsight how weak and arbitrary the acquaintance between him and Naruto had been. This was real friendship.

It made him sick to his stomach. Before that man had left Sasuke screaming and fainting amidst the murdered members of their Clan, he had said he would wait for Sasuke to grow strong and become a worthy opponent – and that the only way Sasuke could ever match him would be to kill his closest person. His best friend.

Sasuke would have killed Naruto if that was the price for pulling that man’s heart out of his chest, preferably still beating.

But Natsuko? No. Never. If the price for killing that man was killing Natsuko, then Sasuke was never going to do it. Perhaps it made him weak. Perhaps it made him a failure.

Sasuke finally understood what Kakashi had been so clumsily trying to explain to them: you could become far worse things than a failure.

x

“Hello, Haku,” Naruto said quietly, crossing his arms in front of his chest. This felt too strange, but if it helped Kakashi-taichou, maybe it would help him, too. “I’m sorry I can’t do this properly, in Wave, but I hope this will be enough.”

The wind rose, pulled yellowed leaves off of tree branches and hurled them through the air. Some smacked wetly against the cold stone of the Memorial, covering the inscriptions.

It didn’t matter. It was too dark to read the names, and the one Naruto wished to see wasn’t there anyway.

“So, I’ve been thinking about you lately. About the kind of shinobi you wanted to be, and the kind you were. About how you spared Sasuke’s life – and what he did with that gift. I don’t think he ever thanked you. He’s not the type… heh, d’you think his tongue would wither and fall off if he actually thanked somebody?”

Naruto hugged himself tighter against the chill. The rain he’d been smelling since early afternoon finally arrived, heralded by the first few drops of water. One landed on top of his head.

“I’m sure you know, Haku, but Sasuke is a missing nin.” Officially, at least. “Kinda ironic, I guess. I mean, you weren’t technically a missing nin, but Zabuza totally was, and you were living with him and training with him and you… I guess that’s personal.” Not a secret, though. Not when Haku had knowingly, deliberately stepped in the path of certain death for Zabuza. “Even if that, kinda, maybe, is what I wanted to talk about.”
The wind howled. Another drop hit Naruto’s cheek, yet another his shoulder, the edge of his ear, his bare toes.

“You’re not upset, are you? I can shut up. Though I usually only shut up when someone tells me to, and you can’t tell me to shut up on account of being dead. I’m sorry about that, did I tell you? ‘cause I am. I really, really am.”

The rain started for real. More droplets hit Naruto’s cheeks.

“So, I wanted to ask this thing. It’s... I usually know these things in my heart, so it’s too weird that I have to ask.”

There was a sound of distant thunder, without a flash of lightning to precede it.

“I should stop stalling, right?”

Naruto took a deep breath and let his hands fall, fists clenched tightly.

“Yosh! Here it is, Haku. If you love someone, is it okay to do anything for them? Like, for example, become a missing nin?” He raised his head to look straight at the Stone.

Behind him, Konoha closed its doors, windows and shutters; the unwary citizens ran for cover with bags over their heads; the last tardy people hurried to bring in their drying laundry. The trees rustled and creaked.

Naruto felt the rainwater on his face, stinging with the force of the wind. He opened his mind and thought about the gale force of a shinobi’s emotion.

There was a difference between love and obligation. Love made you want to do things; obligation helped you determine what were the right things to do. If obligation and love were the same thing, you could live your life honestly and happily.

If they were not... well then it was up to you to decide which was more important: happiness or honesty?

And Naruto was not giving up his obligations. Unlike Haku – who had had the luck of having love and obligation grow to be the same thing – Naruto’s and Sasuke’s and Natsuko-san’s hearts were split. However, just like Haku, Naruto knew who believed in him, who fed him and sheltered him and taught him – and that was Konoha.

Loyalty for loyalty, with love being a hope for the future. Like Dog-taichou and Iruka-nii-chan. Like Anko-nee.

Natsuko-san and Sasuke just went down the other path.

Naruto felt a smile stretch his lips as the chill in his bones seemed to abate. He bowed to the Memorial Stone.

“You’re right, of course, Haku. Thank you for your wisdom.”
Okay, don't panic! I know that basically nothing got resolved, but the next story in the series will be up in a week, and another one a week later, and by that time I hope to have more stuff finished. In the meantime I'd love to hear your opinions and ideas.
READ THIS!

I realise that I’m taking some magic out of the story-telling, so take this as a warning – this ‘chapter’ is NOT A PART OF THE STORY. It’s background info. I am adding it, because some of you asked for this.

If I missed a character, let me know and I will add them.

Also, Hippopotamus (from TYN) and Hound are not included here, because they are not active anymore.

This is all my own world-building specific to the TYN!verse; almost none of the following information is taken from canon.

Konoha ANBU masks are not assigned to people permanently, and can be cycled or recycled upon request, personnel replacement (e.g. death or reassignment of the previous wearer) or when the wearer’s identity is compromised. This mostly concerns ‘personal’ masks.

There is another type of mask: position-specific. These are always the same, and always worn by the ninja currently assigned to the position. These are:

Falcon – the Commander of ANBU
Bear – the chief of staff and head of intelligence
Lobster – the boss of the medical and support division

These three ANBU are not assigned any field missions (unless absolute disaster strikes).

Konoha ANBU personnel (known to the author) during the events of Keep the Wolves From the Gates are as follows. With the exception of those specifically tagged as OC or impossible to identify yet, they should be guessable.

Falcon – canon character, but as of yet impossible to identify
Bear – canon character, but as of yet impossible to identify (and, okay, actually not mentioned by mask in Keep the Wolves from the Gates)
Lobster – probably an OC, unless I realise someone fits
Boar – canon character
Dragonfly – canon character
Jackal – canon character
Tiger – OC, deceased
Lynx – canon character
Cat – canon character
Porcupine – canon character
Dove – canon character
Zebra – canon character
Rabbit – canon character, but as of yet impossible to identify
Grasshopper – OC (not mentioned by mask in Keep the Wolves from the Gates)
Owl – probably an OC, unless I realise someone fits (not mentioned by mask in Keep the Wolves from the Gates)

End Notes

Warnings: angst – oh dear Inari so much angst; implied and referenced sexual situations (Anko in a flirting mode); implied and referenced sexual violence and abuse; referenced prostitution; referenced child prostitution (hypothetical!); child abuse; domestic violence; slavery? (the fuck even is the Caged Bird Seal?); canon-typical violence; minor character death; trauma; mental health issues; mindfuck (no kidding, Itachi shows his limitless love for his brother in increasingly weird ways); referenced suicide; angst; canon-typical cracky stalking and sexual harassment taken seriously; hormones (kids crushing all over the place), poor Sasuke unknowingly has the creepiest crush ever; angst; OCs; bad language; unreliable narrators, very unreliable narrators, don’t rely on your narrators!; and also angst (this is still a fix-it, but, damn it, this is why I don’t deserve nice things)

Really, the story isn’t even dark, but there are some ugly moments, and I’d rather overwarn than underwarn – don’t hurt yourself reading fanfiction, yeah?

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!