Summary

Flashes of an unknown past haunt Naruto, entwining his steps with those of a former life no longer content to stay forgotten. There's a voice on the wind and another lifetime in his head, and it’s time for Uzushio’s Storm God to rise once more.

(The soul of a city is a hard thing to kill. Uzushio is still aware, still waiting. And now, with the rebirth of her greatest Kage, it’s time to call her people home.)
This is that one story I was ranting about in chapter 23 of *backslide*, finally with some vague semblance of plot thanks to the efforts of my (amazing!) longsuffering sounding boards. It is little more than a collection of tropes I tossed in a blender, and is written entirely to satisfy my SasuNaru feels. (I have a lot of those.) So, as with *backslide*, it’s more just my excuse for fluff than anything with substance. Don’t go looking for deep meaning or coherency. You won’t find it. :P

(Weekly updates here, yo, unless I’m feeling particularly inspired.)
There's a voice in Naruto's head, tucked in behind his thoughts, and it's always been there.

When he’s little, it’s simple enough to ignore, easy to overlook, because it doesn’t say much and Naruto rarely understands it when it does. So he runs and plays and ignores the way people glare at him, and it’s simple. Not quite easy, but close enough to count. He’s a child, living first in the orphanage and then on his own, and if he’s a little better than other children at chores and housekeeping and the like, he puts it down to practice when he bothers to think about it at all.

But it comes to him in dreams more than it ever does awake, and there he doesn’t bother to shut it out or push it down, because those dreams are beautiful. There’s an island under a bright summer sun, a city on the sea, with azure waters all around. A city in white and red and shining gold, built on terraces climbing from the edge of the ocean and up into the surrounding hills.

He dreams he’s there, more nights than not. He dreams of walking the streets, running them with other children his age, darting through crowds of civilians and dodging groups of shinobi wearing a symbol he doesn’t know, even though it feels achingly, horribly familiar and laced with regret. The children run and he goes with them, leads them more often than not, and instead of the black and brown hair common in Konoha those around him have red or blond or even stranger colors.

And they smile, these people. They smile and laugh at Naruto, ruffle his hair and call hello, and that’s never, ever happened in Konoha before. Naruto finds himself smiling back without fear or hesitation, too, answering their waves and laughter with his own. And he runs and plays with the other children—his friends, and that’s never happened in Konoha, either—from the time the sun rises to the moment it sets, and then goes back to a huge, stately building that rises from its surroundings like a palace.

There are other children there, some of them his friends and some only acquaintances, and they eat around a long table filled with food. Men and women in bright uniforms watch them, laugh with them, and Naruto thinks that this place is an orphanage, but it’s very different than the one he knows, brighter and cleaner and happier, with shinobi for caretakers instead of civilians.

So Naruto dreams of laughter and friendship and people who slip into his heart and take up space, become more precious than air and even dearer.

Then he wakes to an empty apartment that’s too large for just him, cold gazes and blank stares and dark whispers when his back is turned, children who avoid him and parents who pull their families away by the hand, and it...

It aches. It stings and wrenches and hurts, and Naruto doesn’t think this is the kind of thing you can put a bandage on and fix so simply.

But he runs and laughs anyways, an echo of his bright and beautiful dreams brought into the cold and dreary light of reality. He pretends he has friends, and he plays pranks, and runs, and he tries not to listen to a voice that pounds in his head and whispers not home not home not home go go go go home and I’ll find happiness.

Cold eyes and cold hearts and colder loneliness in reality.
Joy and kindness and comfort in his dreams.

Sometimes Naruto wonders why he even wakes up at all.

(He’s dying by inches and no one cares.)

But then someone does care, and that’s better. The Academy is good, and Iruka-sensei is better yet. The people there don’t whisper so much, even if some of them glare, and Iruka at the very least treats them all the same. Some of the children there aren’t wary of him, either, and their parents don’t seem to care as long as they don’t spend too much time together.

But it’s worse, too, because the voice in Naruto’s head is stronger there, when he’s listening to the teachers. The lectures are enough to drive him mad, because the teacher will be talking about one thing and the voice in his mind fills in everything else, reams and reams of information until Naruto's head throbs and he can't remember a thing. He’s always getting distracted, listening to the voice instead of the chuunin instructor, and they snap and snarl and yell at him for it, even if it’s not his fault. The voice is more interesting a lot of the time, easier to understand, almost like remembering rather than learning.

Chakra, someone says, and an instant later Naruto’s head is full of elemental affinities and the cycles and the different classifications of strength as based on ranks and beginner chakra theory and—

In the midst of trying to sort it all out, he misses what the teacher asks and is treated to a disapproving frown.

They give a test on taijutsu theory, and Naruto looks at the questions and suddenly recalls a hundred different forms and their respective katas, the most appropriate applications depending on the situation and the history behind each sequence and—

His test is turned in mostly blank, with a series of stick figures in action poses doodled along the outside edges. (The teachers, being unfamiliar with the originating style, never notice that it’s an A-rank taijutsu kata from a city lost decades ago, and mark down zeroes with a shake of their heads.)

(“Smart,” one of the older instructors tells Sarutobi grudgingly, when he asks. “Well-read, I think. Certainly knows more than most, but he’s lazy. Not applying himself.”

Sarutobi, too busy to be anything but a slightly distant grandfather figure, sighs and rubs his eyes. Minato was a genius, after all, and it’s only to be expected that his son has at least a little of that. But Naruto is still a child, still unaware of what he is, what he could be, and Sarutobi isn't about to push him. Let the boy have as much of a childhood as he’s able. He’s going to be a shinobi, so it will likely be shorter than most, regardless.)

The classes on sealing are the worst of all. Naruto sits through the first three, but only just, because the voice in the back of his head is growling no no no that’s not right that’s not how it works what are you saying you idiot and the urge to say it out loud is all but overwhelming. But, even though he’s inexperienced in dealing with other people outside of his pretty dreams, Naruto already knows that his opinion is far from appreciated by this teacher, and instead looks away, plans pranks and focuses on other things instead.

Needless to say, he fails that unit, too.

Kunai and shuriken come easily enough, because that’s simple—he listens to the voice, to the hours of practice he’s put in both in dreams and in reality, the understanding of his own body that comes
from dream-memories of training. He’s got a special flair for senbon, too, an almost unnerving accuracy for a nearly-twelve-year-old that lets him hit the target in the center every time. It’s better, like that, because while there’s a basic stance everyone is different, and throws just a little bit differently, and Iruka-sensei doesn’t try to make him change the way he does it. In fact, Iruka-sensei grins at him, reaches out and ruffles his hair and says, “Good job,” with so much warmth that Naruto freezes, not used to hearing it outside of dreams.

He grins back, wide and bright and delighted, and thinks, *precious.*

He darts through bright streets, a colorful market swarming with people, the weight of his hitai-ate on his forehead and the smell of the ocean in his nose. Blond hair sways around his shoulders, the tie lost somewhere between here and the shinobi housing where he lives, and one woman with crimson hair laughs as he flashes past, waving a hand to call him closer.

“Arashi-kun!” she calls. “Wait, wait, you'll never get anywhere with your hair in your face like that!”

Naruto—or Arashi, maybe, or possibly both of them—stumbles to a halt, then ducks back with a bright grin and slips around her stall with its display of beautiful hair ornaments. “Thank you, Mio-san,” he says dutifully. She’s tall and pretty with callouses on her fingers from kunai, her brilliant hair pulled up in a neat knot, and she clucks her tongue when she tugs him close.

“Of course, Arashi-kun,” she says, blue eyes sparkling as she pulls out a brush and runs it through his hair. “Are you late today? Have you eaten?”

“No, Mio-san. Saehara-sensei gave us the morning off, and I ate at home.” Mio’s not his mother, is only distantly related—cousins, or at least that’s what she says, though in reality the Uzumaki clan is large enough that it’s possible they’re hardly related at all—but she acts like it, and Naruto, who gets the same treatment from the majority of people on the streets, has long since learned not to protest.

He does regardless, though, when she picks up a pair of hair-sticks with needle-sharp points and a string of golden bells on them. “Mio-san, I don’t have money for that, and you can’t—”

“Hush,” she says fondly, pulling his hair up into a twist and sliding the ornaments into place. The bells chime softly as she brushes her fingers over them. “They’re mine, so I can do whatever I want with them. And besides, they’re a good backup weapon for a shinobi, don’t you think?” She winks at him, tapping her own hair ornaments, and Naruto flushes but smiles back.

“Thank you, Mio-san,” he says, reaching up to touch the slender string of bells. It’s a sweet sound, cheery and kind, and reminds him of her voice. There are so many people in this dream world who are precious to him, so many near to his heart that it’s very close to the whole city, and he loves them. Loves this place, so different from the waking world.

Mio smiles at him, placing a hand on his head. “Anything for our future Uzukage,” she says, and though the words are amused they’re not patronizing in the least. Hopeful, maybe, and for Naruto, who’s used to mockery and derision whenever he tells someone beyond Hokage-jiji or Iruka-sensei about his goals, it’s the absolute best thing in the world.

“Arashi!” another voice shouts, rising above the din of the market coming awake, and Naruto turns automatically—he’s been living in this dream-world every night for as long as he can remember, and now that name is just as much his as Naruto. There’s a rare dark head bobbing and weaving through the crowd at a run, and a moment later a boy his age ducks a pair of men carrying a crate between them and latches on to Naruto’s arm with a grin.
"Arashi, there you are! You're late!" he says. "Come on, let's go!"

"Kagami!" Naruto protests, letting his best friend pull him away with a laugh. He waves at Mio, who watches them go with an indulgent smile. "Kagami, you didn’t tell me a time to meet you! How was I supposed to know?"

Kagami rolls his dark eyes. "Matches start at eight," he counters. "Don’t you want to see all of them? And as the genius student of the Nidaime Uzukage’s niece, shouldn’t you be able to figure out the Jounin Exams schedule?"

Naruto restrains an eye-roll of his own, even as he breaks into a run with Kagami at his elbow. He waves to a white-haired man selling bread, and then a pair of blue-haired kunoichi standing at the market’s western gate, who laugh as they rush by. “And as the eldest son of the Uchiha clan’s greatest diplomat and ambassador, shouldn’t you act more respectable?” he counters, then sidesteps a woman carrying baskets of flowers, takes a running leap, and springs up to the tiled rooftop above.

A moment later, the Uchiha joins him, looking faintly disgruntled. “What my father doesn’t know can't hurt me,” he mutters, but is gone before he even finishes the thought. Naruto paces him, headed for the arena by the southern wall where he can already feel chakra rising and swelling like the tide.

They laugh as they race each other, leaping across gaps and sliding down inclines, putting as many acrobatics into their leaps as possible. Kagami has been in the city for three years now, and every one of those he’s spent as Naruto's best friend. Naruto has other friends too, of course, but none with whom he shares this edge, this push for competition and drive to get stronger. Rivals, that’s what they are, rivals and best friends and everything in between.

(Sometimes, in the waking world, Naruto looks across the classroom at a sullen boy in Uchiha blue, his clan’s symbol emblazoned proudly on his back, and…regrets. Because Kagami is—was?—so very bright and full of life, and in comparison Sasuke is just…dulled. Flat and grimly sad and it makes Naruto think of the difference between his dreams and his reality, between a shining city on the sea and Konoha amidst its forests. Makes him think of having precious people, many, many of them, and then waking to find that only two exist at all.)

When graduation comes, and the exam is held, Naruto raises his hands to make a bunshin and automatically starts the signs for a bunshin of his own creation, one he practiced just this morning in the dream. Wind and water wrapped up together, durable when summoned and explosive when released, and it’s only at the last moment that Naruto recalls where he is, realizes that that is perhaps not the best jutsu to use in an enclosed classroom, and fumbles.

Disaster, he thinks, staring at the misshapen, awful thing he summoned. And to make it worse, Iruka-sensei yells at him, and he fails, fails like he did last two times he tried to take the exam, because he always defaults to his own Storm Clones and has to correct at the last moment, or gets overwhelmed when he looks at the test questions, or writes something he knows is correct but that disagrees with what his lectures said.

Iruka looks so disappointed that it’s heartbreaking.

He’s the only one who failed, the parents whisper when they come to fetch their children, voices low but not quite low enough.

Well, that’s a good thing. He shouldn’t become a shinobi. Since he is—
Shh. We’re not supposed to talk about that.

Naruto pulls his goggle down, tries to remember only dinner with Iruka last night, the man’s rather awkward kindness. Tries not to count the minutes until he can go home and go to bed and dream, dream of another world where everyone is precious to him.

I just…wish I had graduated.

In that case, Mizuki says to him with a smile, I’ll tell you a special secret.

Don’t trust, the voice in Naruto’s head whispers, but for the first time in a very long while, he forces it back, shuts it out completely until he can’t even hear a trace of it.

He can’t live in dreams forever, after all.

(But that evening, when he closes his eyes for just a minute before going to steal the scroll, he dreams of being a genin with a strange and yet familiar symbol on his hitai-ate, of a jounin sensei who grins at him and calls him a genius and ruffles his hair, of a girl and a boy who train with him and grow with him and urge him on even as he does the same to them.

Naruto wakes with his cheeks wet and a pulsing, throbbing ache in his chest, and even though the voice is silent the quiet is no comfort. I want that, he thinks, and then promptly pushes that thought away, too. He’s long since given up on wanting truly impossible things.)

He dreams out of order, sometimes, though they’re usually only little flashes, moments here and there. Dreams of looking in a mirror and seeing a grown man looking back, a man with long blond hair wearing pale blue robes and a pair of hair ornaments with golden bells. Of a woman with red hair pulled up in a tail and a pair of glasses, shaking her finger at him even as mirth glimmers in her eyes. Of years and fights and creating jutsus that he knows when he wakes up.

He doesn’t use them in class, doesn’t even try, because it’s just a dream, right? Just…a fantasy.

(But sometimes Naruto isn’t so sure, because he dreams of being that man and going to meetings, having people bow and smile and murmur “Sandaime Uzukage Uzumaki Arashi”, dreams of reading letters bearing the newly appointed Hokage’s seal, signed with the name Sarutobi Hiruzen. Dreams of talk of war and then actual war, of going out onto the sea like walking on dry land, each step steady even with a fleet of boats darkening the horizon.

The Storm God of Uzushio, they call him when he summons wind and waves and tears an entire army apart. And they cheer for him, when he comes back at an even, measured pace, stepping onto the shore only to have the woman with the red ponytail throw herself at him and hug him tightly. Only to have Kagami push his way through the crowd that’s gathered and punch him in the shoulder, then wrap his arms around him and pull him close.

“Idiot,” his best friend calls him, and Naruto laughs at him even as he hugs him back, even as he tries not to remember the screams as he ripped that fleet to pieces.

“As the Sandaime Hokage's preeminent and most trusted diplomat, shouldn’t you not talk about the Uzukage that way?” he asks in amusement.

Kagami snorts. “As the revered and much-loved Sandaime Uzukage, shouldn’t you know not to take idiotic risks by now?” he retorts. “Uzushio has barrier seals for a reason, doesn’t it? You could have let Kiri just—"
“Run up against the barrier?” Naruto finishes for him, and he can see the seals that Kagami is talking about, careful and intricate and infused with the blood of every shinobi family in the village. He pulls back and meets the Uchiha's dark eyes, and his own gaze is steady and firm. “No. Uzushio isn’t ready to withstand a siege, and I will not let them get that close. Not to my people.”

With a weary, long-suffering sigh, Kagami lets him go and shakes his head, rolling his eyes just faintly. “Fine,” he says. “But if Kiri is making a move against Uzushio—”

Naruto nods, plans already clicking into place, courses of action and probable outcomes and strategy whirling through his brain. This is no time for his usual impulsiveness, not with an entire village depending on him. “We’ll need Konoha,” he agrees, knowing what his friend was going to say. “And we’ll have to move quickly. Uzushio’s location is good for defense, but we’re also cut off from help here.”

“I can be gone by morning,” Kagami offers, closing his fingers around Naruto's wrist in a loose clasp and meeting his eyes. “Four days to Konoha, and then four days back, and probably a week in between to gather forces and hash out the politics. You can last that long?”

“Uzushio won’t fall so easily,” Naruto answers, twisting his hand to lace their fingers and giving a light, reassuring squeeze. “If worse comes to worst, I’ll let Kiri wear themselves out on the barrier and then send my jounin out to clean up the mess.”

“We’d all appreciate the chance to actually get off our asses and enjoy your leftovers, Uzukage-kun” Ookami Shunka puts in, smiling as she approaches. She’s the jounin sub-commander, from one of Uzushio’s smaller clans, and is carrying a scroll that she waves at Naruto. “I’ve got the rosters of all jounin available and fit for action. Should I start drawing up battle squads?”

Naruto nods, even as he rolls his eyes at her. “I’ve heard,” he says dryly, “that the other Kage actually get respect from their subordinates. Isn't that a novel idea, Shunka-san?”

The silver-haired kunoichi grins cheekily at him. “We respect you, Uzukage-sama. Every one of us. But we also love you, and of course that’s going to make us impudent once in a while. You’re like a little brother to half of our forces, and an older one to the rest of them. Get used to it.” Putting words to actions, she smacks him over the head with her scroll and then turns away with a lazy wave, sauntering off into the crowd.

Naruto sighs and rubs the lump forming on his skull. “I should have just become a fisherman,” he bemoans. “I’d probably get more respect that way.”

Kagami snorts. “Never,” he promises, slinging an arm over Naruto’s shoulders and knocking the sides of their heads together fondly. “We’d all pick on you just as much then. Maybe even more, because you’d be an awful fisherman.”

But he’s smiling, and even though there’s timber just starting to drift in on the tide, timber and sails and scraps of cloth and the faintest hint of red, Naruto smiles back.)
Intro: Traitor's Exposition

[Exposition: The first section of a movement written in sonata form, introducing the melodies and themes.]

“Twelve years ago…you know about the demon fox being sealed, right?”

Naruto is only twelve, only a student and a rather poor one at that, but he knows.

In this at least the voice is no help, gone silent the way Naruto has noticed it usually does when dealing with things from the last few years. So he pauses, watching Mizuki warily. He knows the Shadow Clone technique now, which is a bit of a comfort, and while it’s still not as comfortable as his Storm Clones it’s at least an ace in the hole.

Not that he needs much of one, he thinks, watching Mizuki grin and sneer and posture, while his mind races ahead and calculates odds. They're good.

(Because Naruto might just think they’re dreams, might just dismiss what he learns there, but he still learns it. He might be a genin, but somewhere tucked away beneath the everyday thoughts the knowledge of a Kage is sleeping, just waiting to be called upon. A great Kage, even among his peers, and Naruto, genin or not, has lived two lives. One in the day, village prankster and pariah, and one at night, genius and favored child for all that he’s still an orphan, still a loudmouthed and impulsive brat. And then there are the flashes, the little snatches of time when he is the Uzukage, strong and proud. Two lives, overlapping and tied together by Naruto himself, and even if they're just dreams they still have sway, influence. And that’s enough to push these odds strongly in his favor.)

And then Mizuki laughs at him, sneers gleefully and says, “The rule that says no one is allowed to talk about how you are the Kyuubi no Kitsune.”

Mito-sama, Naruto thinks automatically, and for once he can’t tell if it’s him or Arashi. Maybe there’s no difference between them at all, really. Just memories, and this one—

Jinchuuriki, he thinks, and that explains everything. Everything he’s ever wondered about, and then more besides. All the stares and whispers and children pulled away by the hand, all the cold looks and glares and little bits of cruelty that he’s never quite been able to understand. The word resounds in his head like a bell, like the bell that would chime across Uzushio to tell the hour. And surely, surely, if this is true—because he knows that word, jinchuuriki, knows it as well as he knows Mito’s name and understands all that it stands for, all that it implies, and if what he remembers of that is true then maybe everything else is true as well.

That thought is…breathtaking.

(I killed, he thinks in faint, fraught horror, remembering bodies on the tide, blood staining the sea as his storm clouds gathered and the ocean raged at his will. I killed them all. I've never killed anyone, but I killed an entire army. What does that make me?)

Then Iruka is in front of him, bleeding, injured, dying, and all Naruto can think is this is my precious person. This person is everything to me. I've already lost everyone else in that dream-world, because they're never there when I wake up, and I won't let you take Iruka-sensei from me too.

He casts one last, quick glance at Iruka’s face and then gathers his feet under himself and bolts. Distance, distance and the opportunity to fight, and if he comes out of this alive he’s going to practice
every single one of those jutsus from his dreams in the real world no matter how many people they killed, practice until they’re coming out his ears, and then he’ll never be caught off-guard like this again. Never, never have to risk losing one of his only precious people again. Never. Not the way he did in the dreams, to fire and blood and swords, with Naruto himself driven back from the front lines and cornered, cut down with treachery and ruthlessness.

Never, he swears to himself, and runs.

Mizuki chases him, chases Iruka until he realizes his mistake, and then—

“You're right,” Iruka says, and Naruto freezes, ice coalescing in his chest.

But Iruka meets Mizuki’s eyes, stubborn and strong, and continues, “The demon fox would do that, but Naruto is different. I've already acknowledged him as one of my best students. Maybe he isn't the hardest worker, and he’s clumsy, and no one accepts him, but…he already knows what it is to feel pain inside your heart. He isn't the demon fox.”

Just one person acknowledging it, one person out of a whole village seeing it, but…

Isn't that enough?

A flying kick, practiced so many times with Kagami that it’s practically muscle memory, knocks the windmill shuriken from Mizuki’s hands and hurls him to the ground, and Naruto stands over him, looking down.

“Don’t,” he says viciously, “touch Iruka-sensei. I’ll kill you.”

And maybe it’s Arashi in his head, even though the whisper is silent, or maybe it’s all Naruto, or maybe there's actually no difference between them at all. But Naruto brings his hands up, fingers forming signs that are simultaneously strange and familiar, and his body splits into two. The clone leaps back until it’s right in front of Iruka, even as the original Naruto drops to one knee, slamming a hand down on the ground.

“Suiton,” he growls out, and feels the chakra rise in a wave. “Stormy Upheaval.”

The waterfall that surges up around and behind him, then leaps for Mizuki, leaves absolutely no room to avoid it. Only Naruto, the summoner, and Iruka, sprawled right at his Storm Clone’s back, are safe.

When it clears, and the water vanishes back into chakra, seeps into the ground and is gone again, Naruto rises to his feet and surveys the result. Mizuki is completely still on the ground, and from this distance Naruto can't quite tell if he’s still breathing or not. Part of him—the part that remembers war and bodies and blood on the tide—hopes that he is, but the rest of him—which thinks of precious people and Iruka unable to defend himself—doesn’t really care.

“You okay, Iruka-sensei?” the clone asks, stretching out a hand to the chuunin.

Iruka blinks at it, and then at its hand, and nods slowly. He takes it, letting the clone pull him to his feet, and simply watches as the bunshin offers him a grin and a sloppy salute, then leaps up the nearest tree trunk and into the air. A ripple of chakra, a thought, and Naruto turns his face up just in time to watch the clone rise above the treetops and detonate in a surge of water and wind. That should be enough to get the attention of anyone looking for him, if the earlier waterfall wasn’t.

It’s only then that he goes over and checks Mizuki, who’s still breathing, if a little battered. He winces a bit, because that was an A-rank jutsu the Uzukage always used, and probably overkill
against a chuunin Academy instructor.

“Oops,” he mutters, but doesn’t let it stop him from dropping to his knees and binding Mizuki’s hands and feet with the man’s own ninja wire.

Iruka watches him, dark eyes warm, and once Naruto is done he calls softly, “Naruto, come over here. There’s something I want to give you.”

The hitai-ate is a well-remembered weight, skin-warm and a little battered but all the dearer for it. Naruto reaches up to touch it, traces his fingers over the stylized leaf engraved in the center, and closes his eyes. It’s not the spiral he halfway feels it should be, but—

It’s right, regardless, because there’s no life, no point in time where he isn’t a shinobi. No time when he can’t protect those precious to him the way he did tonight.

Never, and certainly not now.

(And if he has to kill for that, so be it. He’ll never like it, never accept it unless all other avenues are exhausted, but…

He remembers soldiers at the gates, civilians slaughtered in the streets and blood pooling in the gutters, remembers his people at the mercy of a pitiless invader, and knows.

Anything it takes, because they’re precious to me.)

“How did you do that?” Iruka asks much, much later, when they’re sitting in Ichiraku with their ramen in front of them. “That jutsu—it wasn’t a kinjutsu, was it? How did you know it?”

Naruto doesn’t freeze, but it’s close. “I read it on a scroll in the library,” he half-lies through a mouthful of ramen, hoping to disguise the way his voice wants to crack. It’s kind of true—he read it as Arashi, and the scroll was from Saehara-sensei’s personal library. “But I never tried it before. And then that forbidden scroll had a couple of jutsus and I tried them, and after that…I think my chakra control was finally good enough.”

Iruka watches him for a long moment, clearly debating something. “And that clone? I’ve never seen anything like that before, Naruto.”

He grins at that, wide and proud, because Naruto or Arashi, it doesn’t matter. The Storm Clone is his, completely and fully, and no one else has ever managed anything similar. “I made that up! Isn’t it awesome? But whenever you wanted me to do a clone in class I kept wanting to do that one, and since it explodes I figured it wouldn’t be good. So I kept messing up.”

There’s no response to that, but Iruka ruffles his hair and smiles at him, orders them each another round of ramen, and Naruto assumes the subject is done with and Iruka’s curiosity satisfied.

(“His own invention?” the Hokage murmurs around his pipe, and his eyes aren’t on Iruka, but on the portrait of his successor that hangs on the wall. “An entirely new type of clone—that’s more than impressive for a boy of twelve. And he managed an A-rank jutsu without ever having attempted it before. Hm. Perhaps he is his father’s son after all.”

“I don’t understand it,” Iruka says helplessly, spreading his hands. “I’ve been looking back through all his work at the Academy, and it’s…strange. There are some things, like kunai and shuriken and senbon, which he’s amazing at. And on some of his tests the hardest questions have the right
answers, while the easy ones are left blank. I just—I thought he was a kinesthetic learner, or something like that, but…” He trails off, shaking his head. “I don’t know, Hokage-sama.”

Sarutobi closes his eyes and leans back in his chair, considering the situation. Naruto has apparently inherited his father’s chakra control along with his mother’s chakra reserves, and that is a… formidable combination. There’s some form of genius in there too, apparently, to be able to use an A-rank jutsu after having only ever seen it in a scroll.

But then, of course, there is the fact that Naruto failed to pass his graduation exam three times, only passed this time because of extenuating circumstances, and that is…confusing.

Perhaps it’s the fox’s influence coming through, but given the boy’s actions tonight, his wild defense of the only teacher to acknowledge him, Sarutobi thinks that unlikely.

“Thank you, Iruka,” he says at length. “Go home and rest. You’ve more than earned it, after yesterday.”

He doesn’t watch the chuunin leave, but turns his gaze back to Minato’s portrait, thoughtful and a little sad.

“I wonder,” he murmurs into the still air. “I wonder just how much of you is in that child, Minato. More than I had suspected, clearly.”

(Very little, actually, in the end. Naruto is and always will be far more his mother’s son.)

In the end, it’s actually Kakashi who gives him both the idea and the proof he needs, unwittingly as it is. They’re standing in front of the Memorial, staring at the names as their maybe-sensei walks away, and Sakura and Sasuke are both watching him go.

But Naruto’s not. Naruto can’t tear his eyes away from those neatly carved lines, those names so carefully set into stone. From one name in particular, which feels like a shot to the heart just to look at.

_Uchiha Kagami_, it reads, and all Naruto can see for an endless, breathless moment is dark hair cut at chin-length, dark eyes forever holding a spark of amusement at the world around them, a warm smile and a pale scar on a stubborn jaw. All he can hear is a relieved idiot and a cheerful Arashi, there you are! All he can feel is a friendly tap on the shoulder, a tight hug, the heat of fire set against his wind and water, and he closes his eyes and leans back against the post he’s been tied to, thoughts spinning.

They pass, of course. Naruto didn’t expect anything different, but as soon as he manages to get himself free of the ropes, he doesn’t pause to celebrate. Instead, he heads for the main library, sneaking in past the woman at the front desk who has a tendency to sneer at him, and then heading for the shinobi records.

There are a lot of shinobi, and a lot of Uchiha clan members. But there aren’t that many named Kagami, and only one written with the kanji Naruto’s Kagami used to spell his name. The scroll is old and dusty, obviously long untouched, but Naruto hunkers down in the aisle with it and rubs the grime off as best he can, leans forward to try and decipher the tiny, neat lettering in the low light.

_Uchiha Kagami, Chief Ambassador to Uzushiogakure by appointment of Sandaime Hokage Sarutobi Hiruzen, in service to Sandaime Uzukage Uzumaki Arashi._

The date of his death is at the beginning of the Second Shinobi World War, and the few, sparse
details are more than enough to make Naruto’s blood run cold.

*Killed in an ambush by shinobi of Suna, in the process of attempting to reach Konoha with Uzushio’s request for assistance against Kiri.*

Naruto sits back on his heels, trying to keep his breathing steady. Just like his dream, with those ships on the horizon, an army of shinobi coming to invade and destroy. Kirigakure’s might, and for all Uzushio’s strength is was a small village, relatively, and Whirlpool Country was equally as tiny. They were isolated and alone, even with allies on the mainland, trapped between the vicious might of Kiri and the cold indifference of Kumo.

Kagami died, trying to bring aid, and by the time anyone realized it Uzushio had fallen too.

The paper crinkles under Naruto’s fingers where he’s gripping it too tightly, and he blows out a careful breath. He can almost, *almost* remember it, the city’s fall, its complete destruction at the hands of the Mizukage and his best shinobi. He’d try harder, but…

But he’s not sure he *wants* to remember. Not that. Not death and destruction and tragedy when for so long his dreams of that place have been peace and beauty and happiness.

But…they're not just dreams, are they?

(Those jutsus, those things that he can never bring himself to practice—they really have killed people, haven’t they?)

Naruto pauses, still staring at the name written on the scroll, and then he takes a deep breath and pushes to his feet. The histories of the various countries are three rows over, and arranged alphabetically. He finds Uzushio without trouble, a handful of thick books and some scrolls, and picks the first one at random before settling down to read.

Because he’s lived it through Arashi’s eyes, whoever Arashi is. (*You, that little voice whispers behind his thoughts. *I’m you, don’t you see? I always have been.*) Lived it and breathed it and sweated and bled for the Uzushio that exists in his dreams. But he doesn’t *know* anything, not really. He’s aware of the little things, like how the market burns with jewel-bright colors in the afternoon sun, how the streets feel rough beneath his feet, how the birds rise in sweeping patterns when the storm-winds start to blow. And sure, he knows snatches of history, bits of trivia, the ninjutsu and the taijutsu and the way Saehara-sensei fought with her sword in one hand and her whip in the other, but…

But not the cold, bare facts laid out in books, and somehow, that’s the kind of information Naruto wants right now. Not blood and breath and *living* people, but a historian’s words through a lens of time.

Because he remembers their unit, in class, on the five great nations and the countless smaller countries. But never in there, never *anywhere*, was Uzushio mentioned. There was never a class on a shining city by the sea, or on a man called the Storm God. No mention made of war with Kiri or the fall of an entire shinobi village. No word, no thought, and Kagami died for this, for a city lost to time, and Naruto can’t stand that.

Kagami died. They *all* died, his people, or fled, vanishing into the press of life in the other nations because their own was so utterly destroyed, and that…

That makes Naruto, or Arashi, or both of them just *ache*.

*I was happy there*, he thinks, staring down at the book on his lap. *Uzushio made me happy. I love*
Iruka-sensei, and Hokage-jiji, and Sakura-chan. Maybe Kakashi-sensei, too. I can probably…
tolerate Sasuke, even.

But…I’m not happy here, am I? Not the way I was there.

He shakes off the thought, but it lingers, stays with him even when he staggers up to the front desk
under a three-foot stack of books. It doesn’t go away, not out in the sunshine or when the moon rises
or when he’s meeting his team in the morning for training. It hovers, and lingers, and stays.

(Honestly, Naruto doesn’t even try to drive it away.)

Naruto is…erratic, Kakashi thinks, watching the blond boy bounce his way down to the bridge.
Kakashi himself is perched up in a tree, wanting to get a better feel for the team dynamics.

He remembers yesterday, when they had their test. Naruto had been the first to rush forward, the
only one to stand out in the open and challenge him directly. His tajutsu had been…unexpected. Not
Academy standard style, not a mishmash of twenty different things like he’d get from just watching
other shinobi practice, but…different. Not familiar at all, but clearly a distinctive style. Clearly well-
practiced.

It hadn’t helped, of course. Not against a jounin. But for the class’s dead-last student, it had definitely
been a cut above what Kakashi expected.

And then…

Tossing him in the river was a bit of a mistake, possibly, given the report from that incident with the
traitor Mizuki. He’d used a Suiton jutsu that night, summoned without any nearby source of water
and strong enough to completely incapacitate a chuunin. But Kakashi had looked at the
loudmouthed, brightly-clothed exterior and made assumptions, written that success off as a fluke and
completely underestimated the boy, just the way he always did Obito.

And, like Obito in those last moments, Naruto had proven just how bad an idea that was.

Suiton: Tornado of Water!

Definitely a bad idea, Kakashi thinks with a soft chuckle, rubbing at the lump on the side of his head.
Not strong enough to take out a jounin, not yet, but…with practice it will be. Practice and time and
opportunity.

He likes this team a little more already.

Sasuke watches Naruto, and always has.

They're similar, after all. Not the same, but perhaps the next best thing, even with Naruto's loudness
and boisterous cheer, even with his strange fumbles when Sasuke knows he’s actually rather capable,
even with his odd, distracted air at times, as though he’s listening to something no one else can hear.

“That’s a powerful jutsu,” Kakashi says mildly, when they're sparring and Naruto blasts through a
tree with a combination of water and wind that even a chuunin shouldn’t have been able to manage.

Naruto just laughs it off, rubbing the back of his head and looking away. “I saw it in a scroll,” he
says cheerfully, then runs off to fawn over Sakura like he’s some sort of mindless fool.

“That’s not the standard Academy style,” Kakashi says, watching over the top of his book as Naruto knocks Sasuke on his ass with a taijutsu combination Sasuke has never seen before.

Naruto makes a disgusted face. “You didn’t say we had to use the Academy style!” he protests. “Kakashi-sensei, I suck at that! Can’t I use mine?”

And Sasuke remembers spars in class, beating Naruto every time, and he wonders. Wonders because there’s nothing else to do, not when Naruto can walk up trees and twist water and air to his will, not when his moments of idiocy are interrupted by pure genius. Near-perfect chakra control, Kakashi has told them, and has promised that he’ll teach Sasuke and Sakura at some point, but rather than gloating Naruto looks away from them, into the distance, as though he’s seeing someone else entirely.

Naruto stops wearing orange three days after they pass as a team. Instead, he wears blue. Not Uchiha navy, but indigo and sky-blue and twilight-blue, paired with white and black and soft dove-grey, that spiral from his jumpsuit painstakingly stitched onto every item. He trains as much as Sasuke, daybreak to dusk, and Sasuke will sometimes meet him walking home, both of them exhausted and battered but satisfied.

They’re rivals still, and even Sasuke will acknowledge that, but it’s…easier. Simple. Sasuke doesn’t want a friend, not now, not when he still has to kill his brother, but…

A rival he can manage. That’s fine, surely. Beating Naruto, with his Suiton and Fuuton and strange but devastatingly quick taijutsu, with his mindless determination paired with brief flashes of overwhelming brilliance, will be good preparation for facing Itachi. Not perfect, but…good enough, perhaps.

(And if sometimes, when it’s dark and the shadows are long in his apartment, if he rolls over in bed until he’s facing away from the window and then carefully, cautiously touches his lips, remembering just for half of a second—

Well. No one has to know.)
Intro: Rising Progression, Accelerando

[Progression: The movement of chords in succession.

Accelerando: A symbol used in musical notation indicating to gradually quicken tempo.]

Their first C-rank is no simple escort and protection mission, not a C-rank at all no matter what Tazuna the Bridge-Building tells them.

The Demon Brothers find them, take out Kakashi and then come for the genin, and a part of Naruto wants to hesitate, flinch back and freeze, but the rest of him has dreamed of mission after mission, because Arashi became a genin at nine and a chuunin at twelve, and has been—had been?—going on them for years already. So it’s instinct to lunge forward, instinct and…something else.

Because there’s a Kage sleeping in the back of his thoughts, buried beneath the everyday and mundane, and the Kage sees the Kiri hitai-ate and burns. It’s regret and remorse and anger and fear all tangled up, resentment that makes no sense in anything except Naruto’s own context. Because he remembers being Uzukage, remembers Kiri ships at the edges of the city, a traitor in their midst bringing the barrier down at the worst possible moment. Remembers Kiri shinobi slaughtering villagers, ninja and civilian alike, and—

That part of him rages, makes him whirl right past the clawed gauntlets and chains that the brothers use and draw his senbon, still his best weapon. Sasuke is flanking him, moving as though they’ve practiced this when they never have, but Naruto takes out the man on the left and Sasuke takes the one on the right, and when the smoke clears they’re the ones still standing.

(Kakashi helps, but the less Naruto thinks of that lazy porn-obsessed bastard who let them think he was dead, the better it will be for his blood pressure.)

And when it’s all over, Sasuke looks at him, dark eyes as inscrutable as ever, and nods. Just once, but it’s more of an acknowledgement than Naruto has ever gotten from him before.

It’s staggering, that gesture.

And because all Naruto has ever wanted, ever more than a rival or a friend, is for that person to look at him without contempt, to acknowledge him, he grins back, wide and bright, and falls into place beside him as they head on down the road.

Sasuke steps in front of a blow meant for him.

Naruto stares at him, stares as Sasuke starts to fall, and all he can think of for one endless heartbeat is standing on the docks of Uzushio as Kagami’s ship departs, waving once and watching Kagami lean over the railing to wave in return before one of the burly jounin sailing with him grabs him by the scruff and hauls him back to safety.

Naruto had laughed, then, laughed and waved until the ship was out of sight, and then he’d never seen Kagami again.

Kagami had died on the way back to Konoha, ambushed and ruthlessly cut down, and now Sasuke is the same.
Naruto hasn’t blocked out the voice in his head, not since Mizuki. He’s listened and accepted and it feels like a part of him, like himself, but right now—

But right now the man he used to be is rising, right along with his grief and anger, pushing down even the flickers of crimson fury that try to escape. And Naruto closes his eyes and just...doesn’t fight. He lets a whole lifetime of instinct take over, doesn’t even try to resist what his body knows to do, knows how to do, and moves.

“Fuuton: Godly Wind from the Mountains!”

Wind rises, and Naruto bares his teeth as he feels the ice mirrors around them straining. Immediately, even as the vortex forms, he raises his hands again. “Suiton: Water Trumpet!”

The mirrors crack, exploding outward under the sheer force of chakra and the combined jutsus. They shatter and fall to pieces, and the other shinobi—Haku, Zabuza called him, but no, Naruto doesn’t want his enemies to be human, doesn’t want the one who killed Sasuke to have a name and an identity and a story—is hurled backwards. Naruto lunges with all the speed he can call up, moves so fast he’s nothing but a streak of blue and grey and gold, lashes out and cracks that loathed mask right down the center with a single blow.

I hate you, he thinks, furious and bereft and aching. I hate you! You took another of my precious people away from me!

And then it’s that boy from the forest, staring back at him with equally bereft and empty eyes, and Naruto—

Naruto pulls his blow at the last moment, flips the senbon in his hand around and strikes with his knuckles instead of the needle, and knocks Haku to the ground.

“What?” he demands, voice breaking. “You’re from that time, but—”

And Haku tells him.

They're the same, aren’t they, in the end? Jinchuuriki and child of a bloodline, both hated and feared and shunned. That’s why, when Haku whispers kill me, Naruto sets his teeth, pulls one set of memories to the front, and darts forward too fast to see. He grabs Haku’s arm, and from under his fingers black marks race out, twisting into a dark seal, and Haku’s eyes flutter shut. He falls, instantly unconscious, and Naruto spins to where he can feel Zabuza’s chakra.

There’s a sound from the mist, voices speaking and then the chirping of a thousand birds, and a body collapses to the bridge, one soul lighter without the weight of life to hold it up.

He closes his eyes and turns away.

I'm sorry, he thinks, because Haku will wake up to an empty world, and it's because he didn’t move fast enough, couldn’t stop Zabuza’s death. I'm so very, very sorry for your loss.

Haku weeps, when he hears, inconsolable and shaken to the core. And when Naruto goes down on his knees beside him, the other boy leans into him. He lets Naruto curl his arms around his shoulders and hold him as Naruto himself has never been held before, and...

They're shinobi. They're tools. But they're human, too, to grieve and fear and hope, and that’s all they can ever be unless they cut out their own hearts. It’s not good, not fine, not even close, but
they're still breathing even though they're unwanted, unloved. And maybe, just maybe, they can lean on each other until they learn to stand against this cold world on their own, if they ever do.

(Kakashi makes no protest when, as they leave, Haku falls into step with Naruto, who looks at him and smiles sadly and doesn't say I'm so sorry. I wish you would blame me, because that would be easier.

But nothing is ever easy, and Haku just smiles sadly back, and they walk on together.

Sasuke walks in front of them and says nothing, but Naruto thinks that he might as well be walking with them, too, for all that's written in his dark eyes.)

After everything, after explanations and paperwork and medical checkups and recoveries, it’s just…them. It’s Naruto and it’s Haku and it’s Naruto and Haku, living together in a tiny apartment that’s too big for one but just right for two. It’s shared meals and silent sorrow, nightmares comforted by the sound of another’s breathing, goodbyes and hellos and being able to say “I'm home” and receive a response.

There are still dreams, standing between them—memories, more accurately, Haku’s of Zabuza dying and Naruto's of Uzushio falling—and they don’t talk about those but that’s okay.

Haku is training as a medic-nin, and Naruto is still a genin but with the Chuunin Exams looming, Kakashi pushing them forward in his lazy, manipulative way. They're both a little lost but not alone anymore, and that’s…better. A comfort, when there are few enough of those to go around.

Naruto dreams at night, every night, another life seen in bits and pieces and broken shards, whirling through his mind too fast for him to follow though he follows it anyway because Arashi is him, and whatever lines he thought were between them are growing thin now, if they ever existed at all.

He dreams of being a genin, and then a chuunin, and then a jounin. Dreams of advancing and rushing and pushing himself forward, a whole city at his back, the Uzumaki clan firmly united behind a young man everyone calls a genius, but who laughs and smiles like anyone else, who devotes himself to his village without fail or hesitation. Remembers an old man with long white hair standing before him, lifting an ornate hat from his head and settling it gently on Naruto's, their blue-and-white robes of office shining under the spring sun. Remembers signing his name with the new title for the first time, Sandaime Uzukage Uzumaki Arashi.

And then he wakes up, and walks through the streets, and people whisper how he’s unfit to be a shinobi, unfit to live among them like a human when he’s actually not.

It hurts more now than it did when he didn’t know the reason for it, somehow. Aches and stings and smarts because he’s spent twelve years in this village, growing and running and laughing like any other boy, and how, how can they have watched him, seen him as a child, and still call him a demon?

Haku doesn’t understand completely, but…enough. He’s not deaf, not blind. He notices the whispers and the glares and how few outside of Sasuke and Sakura and Kakashi ever acknowledge him at all. Because he’s kind, he never asks, but Naruto notices the way he steps forward, walks between Naruto and the more crowded sections of the street whenever they're out in public. It’s sweet, and Naruto looks at him and smiles, and thinks of Uzumakai Yui with her red hair tied in a high tail, her fierce defense whenever someone put Arashi down. She had only been his assistant, as Uzukage, but she quickly became a friend. Haku would have liked her, he thinks, and grins at his new friend, who’s pretty enough to be a girl and has the heart of a tiger beneath his calm façade.
“We should see if Iruka-sensei’s up for ramen,” he suggests, crossing his arms behind his head and basking in the late afternoon sunset.

Haku doesn’t quite roll his eyes, but it’s close. “How about we just make something for ourselves,” he counters. “I’m sure your teacher’s wallet will thank us.”

Naruto gives the boy his best pout. “Ah, but Haku! Ramen is amazing!”

“Naruto-kun…”

That look, while seemingly placid and calm and only slightly exasperated, is one Naruto has come to realize means only trouble for him. With a sigh, he raises his hands before he’s stabbed in several vulnerable places with senbon and gives in. “All right. But can we have yakitori then?”

Haku smiles at him like he’s a well-behaved puppy or something, and clearly just refrains from patting him on the head. “Yes, Naruto-kun. We can have yakitori. But you’ll have to help me make it, all right?”

“Haku! Don’t talk to me like I’m five!”

“I would never. Surely it’s all in your imagination, Naruto-kun.”

“Haku!”

So it’s Naruto and it’s Haku and it’s Naruto and Haku, and then the Chuunin Exams happen and it’s Gaara too, staring across the arena with a dead eyes that only just manage to cover the loneliness and anguish that pours out of him.

Naruto doesn’t need the whispering voice to tell him that this is another soul adrift in the same way he is. Two he’s met so far, within a month of each other, and sometimes Naruto looks across the dinner table at Haku and wonders how many more there are. How many more children like them, cast away and unwanted, rejected by those around them and only surviving on willpower and sheer stubborn determination to live.

Too many, surely, but at the same time not enough.

Konoha wins in the short war, even though the Sandaime dies—*one more precious person lost, one more and never again, not ever*—and Sasuke is marked by the Snake-bastard, and Naruto gets dragged off to look for Tsunade.

(All he can think about is a little girl, clinging to her granduncle’s hand during Uzushio’s first time hosting the Chuunin Exams. A little blond girl with big eyes and a stubborn slant to her mouth, a fiery temper and a soft touch, and he wonders how Arashi knew—knows?—the future Godaime as a child until he realizes just how old she really is.)

Jiraiya teaches him Rasengan, or the beginning of it. And at night, after the Toad Sage is asleep or out on his own business, Naruto sits up in bed, missing Haku. It’s strange how quickly he’s become accustomed to this, to not being alone, strange and unsettling because Naruto likes to think that he’s independent and self-reliant and able to stand on his own, and this…this doesn’t exactly make him weak, but maybe it’s the next best thing.
He remembers Arashi’s grief, his grief, any time an Uzushio shinobi fell. Remembers and mourns, because this is the price of having precious people, this fear and terror and open, obvious, gaping wound telling enemies just where to strike.

Not that it matters. Not in the least, because Naruto isn’t going to lose any more of his precious people. Not the way he did in Uzushio, blood and flames and war and the sea stained red beneath the dawn. Not like he lost the Sandaime. Not any way, not again.

He masters Rasengan in a handful of days, and there’s excitement bubbling in his chest as he stares at his hand, the first time he completes it successfully. It’s hard, it hurts, but there’s so much potential. Naruto knows, objectively, that the Yondaime Hokage was a genius—everyone says so—but this…

Flexing his fingers, he grins, then slips away from Jiraiya’s less-than-watchful eye to find a secluded clearing to practice in.

They call—called?—Uzumaki Arashi the Storm God for his wind, for his water. Wind comes easier, always, and Naruto calls it up in its most basic, raw form, adds it to that swirling sphere of chakra just because he can, just because he’s been pushing himself, as Naruto, as Arashi, since the very first time he accepted his dreams as one kind of reality. Because he’s the boy who, at the age of twelve, twisted water and wind into a bunshin just to see what it would do, and this is no different.

The resulting jutsu doesn’t quite blow him away, but anyone else is fair game.

(Orochimaru comes for Tsunade, and Naruto grins. Rasengan in one hand, the tight spiral sucking up wind chakra. Suiton: Destruction Torrent in the other, and he’s used this type of attack before, against Haku’s ice mirrors, but this is a hundred times more powerful than a redirected tornado and a jet of water.

This is enough to stop one of the Sannin in his tracks, and if it’s not enough to drop him completely, well. Soon. Naruto will keep practicing.)

Then he’s dragged back to Konoha, and Tsunade heals Sasuke.

Then Sakura—the only girl Naruto has ever looked at, the only one he’s ever really wanted a kind word or gentle gesture from—ignores him completely. She throws her arms around Sasuke’s neck as he sits up, clings and cries and never looks over, even though Naruto was the one to save her from Gaara’s sand, even though he was the one to convince Tsunade to return to the village and cure Sasuke.

Never once does she look at him, and Sasuke—

Sasuke doesn’t, either. He keeps his eyes on the wall even as he rests a hand on Sakura’s shoulder, as close to an acceptance of her emotions as Naruto has ever seen from him.

Naruto looks at them for a long moment, feeling his smile fade. He fixes it to his face and ducks away, out of the room and off on his own.

They don’t notice him leaving, either.

That night, he dreams of death and loneliness, of being backed against a wall of the building that was once the Administrative Center of Uzushio with the Mizukage and four of his best shinobi around him. Dreams of a grim and pale-faced redhead boy who stares at him with regret in his eyes and anger twisting his mouth.
“Reisi,” Naruto says, regret of his own twisting and turning in his gut, because he *knows* this chuunin, has seen him with his aunt Yui and thought him a polite, smart child, if quiet and reserved. “Reisi, why?”

But Uzumaki Reisi has no answer, and Naruto has no time to get one out of him, because the Mizukage closes in.

He fights. Of course he fights, but the Mizukage is fresh and has his jounin to assist him, and Naruto has been fighting for almost three days straight now and is entirely alone. There's fighting on the docks and in the streets, carefully targeted to hit the village’s most vulnerable, necessary areas—administration, command, communication, medical—and no chance of any Uzushio shinobi coming to their Kage’s aid. No chance of escape, not when Naruto can already feel even his Uzumaki reserves scraping rock bottom.

In the end, he dies.

And as he falls, throat cut from behind and blood a hot-wet flood against his skin, Uzushio’s golden stones seem to rise up and catch him, cradling his body as he lands. It’s still a hard blow on top of all the aches, but not as hard as it could have been. Not nearly.

The Mizukage huffs out a derisive laugh, though he’s also bleeding heavily and entirely out of breath. With a petty sort of viciousness, he kicks Naruto's glaive, the weapon clattering away to land well out of reach.

“Our victory,” the man says, and Naruto's world fades to darkness.

But not entirely.

Were he not already dreaming, he would think it a dream. Some sort of hallucination, maybe. But there's a vast sort of grief around him, something ageless and untouchable, sunk into Uzushio’s very stones like the seals that were used to create her. Because the Shodaime Uzukage and the other founders drew Uzushio’s stone from the sea, from within the earth in its rawest form, and then added their seals and created an entire city in the space of a month. And the seals remain, linger even now in the streets and walls and houses, in the fountains of the market district and the wave-lapped piers, present from one end of Uzushio to the other.

Normally, they're dormant. Normally, they sleep, silent and all but forgotten.

But every major shinobi family has added their blood to the heart of the city, the series of incredibly complex, intricate seals hidden deep underground that hold Uzushio together. The city knows them, recognizes their blood, and today, for the past three days, that blood has run in the streets and pooled in the gutters as Uzushio shinobi die.

Blood has power. Chakra *is* power, soul-born and strong, and for the past three generations the seals that make her have tied Uzushio to both. Both of which have been spilled in copious amounts in this invasion.

It’s enough. A spark, a flicker, and all around Naruto there's a breath, a heartbeat, a *knowing*.

*Child,* that vast voice, heartsick with grief, whispers in his ear.

*Sleep now,* she tells him as the darkness rises up like a cresting wave.

*Sleep now. The city is fallen and the people are fled, but your soul dwells here.*
Someday, child, I will call you back, and you will come.

Her touch is peace and painlessness, comfort and ease, and just for a moment Naruto forgets about war and sorrow and death at his heels. He closes his eyes, cradled by sun-warmed golden stones, and thinks of happier times, Kagami and Saehara-sensei and his teammates Haru and Fuyu, red rooftops and white stone and golden-brown streets beneath the sun, storms rising above the sea and immense in their power. People and moments and sights seen once but always treasured, bits of humanity amongst the tragedy.

*I will*, he promises, even as he fades away entirely. *I’ll come back to you.*

*I promise.*

That night, when the wind rises to whisper through the treetops, when the moon sails between tattered clouds and casts its waxing light across the sleeping village, Naruto opens his eyes in bed and sits up.

The air is trembling, shivering, *singing*. His blood feels like fire in his veins, like moonlight, like star-shine. He’s tense and trembling, ready to run, but run to rather than *away*.

Because there’s a voice on the wind, not like the one he’s heard his whole life—*me*, he thinks now, with some surprise. *Oh, it was always me, wasn’t it? I’m Arashi. Arashi is me*—but something deeper, vaster, overwhelming as it crests the horizon like a wave and breaks over him with a soundless thunder. It’s a voice, but in the same way that the sun is a star—the word isn’t nearly large enough to encompass all that it *is*.

*Come home*, it whispers, and even that is enough to make Naruto cry out, clapping his hands over his ears. *Please, my child. I’ve waited so long.*

And Naruto *remembers*. He remembers the way that the city sang beneath his feet, how it hummed and whirred and buzzed with life, spoke without words and felt *alive* around him. As a child and a man and then more than ever as Uzukage, and it spoke to him. *She* spoke to him.

Uzushio is calling him *home*.

“Naruto-kun?” Haku asks, sleepy but wary, sitting up on his futon across the small room. “Are you all right?”

Naruto looks at him, this boy without roots, without a family, with only as much of a future as he himself can build with blood and sweat and effort. Looks at him and thinks, *Oh, but we’re the same, aren’t we, in the end?*

Looks away, slides out from underneath the blankets, and says softly, “Sorry, Haku, I’ll be back in a bit. Don’t wait up for me.” Then he’s out the window without even bothering to change out of his pajamas. Out and running, because of all the things that hold him in Konoha, only one tie is forged to be unbreakable, and right now he needs that.

(But unbreakable or not, maybe it can stretch."

Maybe he *wants* it to stretch.)
Intro: The Makings of the Triad

[Triad: Three note chords consisting of a root, third, and fifth.]

Iruka wakes to a knock on his window and a face outside the glass, a mop of windswept blond hair and wide, almost desperate eyes.

It’s Naruto, so of course he slides out of bed and opens the window, allowing the boy to slip past him into the room.

“Naruto?” he asks, trying to stifle a yawn, and this is truly a surprise. He hadn’t thought Naruto even knew where he lived. “Is something wrong?”

Naruto hesitates, wavers, looking around the room and anywhere but at Iruka. Iruka frowns, because Naruto is bold and bright and never hesitates, even when it would be better to. “Naruto?” he repeats, settling back on the bed and patting the mattress beside him in invitation. “What’s going on?”

With a deep breath, visibly steeling himself, Naruto takes the offered seat and twists his fingers in his lap. “Iruka-sensei,” he says tentatively, which is…unnerving. “You know you’re—you’re one of my precious people, right?”

Iruka looks at him and remembers that night in the forest, Mizuki on the ground and Naruto standing over him to growl out ‘Don’t touch Iruka-sensei. I’ll kill you.’ He smiles, reaches out and buries his fingers in golden hair that’s longer than usual, ruffles gently because he’s been in Naruto’s place. He was just like this boy once, and he knows very well what it means to finally find someone you can hold dear.

“I thought so,” he admits, smiling at his favorite student. “But…it’s still nice to hear it. Thank you, Naruto. I’m honored.”

Naruto smiles back, his usual brilliance sparking and flaring behind the expression before worry tamps it down again. He swallows, and then asks, “You’re…not going to stop being my precious person if I don’t…see you for a while, right?”

There have been rumors, around the village, about the Toad Sage Jiraiya taking the Uzumaki boy as an apprentice. Realizing what this is about, Iruka feels the tightness around his heart ease. Naruto is a lonely boy, clinging to what family he’s made for himself, and he doesn’t want to let that go. Of course he’d worry, facing the prospect of leaving the village long-term for the first time.

He wraps an arm around Naruto’s shoulders, pulls the boy against his side with all the affection he feels for him, clumsiness and occasional genius and now-forgotten love of orange and all. “Never, Naruto,” he promises into that mop of hair. “Physical distance doesn’t matter, not when people’s hearts are close. Emotional closeness beats physical separation every time. If you have to leave, I’ll still be right here waiting when you come back. No matter how long it takes.”

All of the tension Iruka hadn’t noticed eases out of Naruto’s body in a rush, and he turns to hug Iruka back, arms tight and stronger than they’ve ever been. “I just…I love Konoha,” Naruto says in a rush, like it’s a confession, and maybe it is. “But Iruka-sensei, I want them to acknowledge me. I want that even more than I want to become Uzu—Hokage, but it’s…” He shakes his head, as though shaking off bad thoughts, and then looks up to meet Iruka’s eyes. There’s something inside the sky-blue that Iruka can’t recall ever seeing before, and it…alarms him, almost. Because Naruto shouldn’t wear that
expression, shouldn’t look like that even if Iruka can’t quite say what that is.

“You should,” Iruka says carefully, because it somehow feels like there’s an entire world hanging on his words, “do whatever is going to make you happy, Naruto. Because even if the villagers acknowledge you, if you’re not happy, it won’t be enough. And more than anything, I want you to be strong and safe and happy, no matter what path you pick in the end.”

Naruto looks away, out the window and towards the east. There’s no sun yet, not even a hint of dawn, but something like a light breaks across his face and he grins. Beams and smiles and looks back at Iruka with something very like joy in his eyes, and it’s…good. That’s what Naruto is supposed to look like. Not solemn and sad, but determined. Joyful.

“Thanks, Iruka-sensei!” he says, wrapping his arms around Iruka’s chest and squeezing tightly, then sliding off the bed and hopping onto the windowsill. He pauses there for just a moment, eyes still on the horizon, and then looks back. One last smile and he’s gone, vanished soundlessly into the darkness.

Iruka stays awake for a long while after that, turning the conversation over in his head. It almost sounded like…

But no. It’s a ridiculous thought, and Iruka shakes his head with a smile as he chides himself for having an overactive imagination. With a faint sigh, he turns off the light and slides back under the covers, pulling them up to his chin and closing his eyes.

Morning will come soon enough, and then he’ll track Naruto down and get a complete explanation out of him.

Later. They still have time, after all.

Haku watches Naruto slide back in through the open window with an ease most genin don’t possess, watches as he simply stands in the center of the room for a moment, surveying the things that have accumulated over the years. It’s a look Haku is familiar with after so many years of traveling with Zabuza.

What here is precious to me? What can I not bear to leave behind, and how much of everything can I do without?

It’s a bit of a surprise, because Haku knows that there are no missions going out, no trips planned like the one to hunt down the Godaime. And Naruto has always—always, always—given the impression that he was absolutely devoted to this village hidden among the leaves, to this place where his team lives and grows.

“Naruto-kun?” he asks softly, setting his scroll aside and folding his hands in his lap as he looks across at his friend. His first friend, really. First and only, because as easily as the people of Konoha accept those with bloodlines, he’s still a stranger, still an outsider, and while they’re polite enough he’s never really going to be one of them.

Naruto glances up at him, quick and slightly distracted, and Haku pauses at the look in those blue eyes. Familiar, but not. They’re Naruto’s eyes, but…concentrated, somehow. Distilled. Fully realized. The person behind them is more Naruto than he’s ever seen before, and the look in them is…

Mighty, Haku thinks, because it is the only word that could possibly do that expression justice.
That’s enough to decide him. With a faint huff, he rises from his futon, reaches for the small, battered pack that has served him since Zabuza first gave it to him, and starts folding his few possessions.

“Haku?” Naruto asks, sounding somewhere between confused and—just faintly—amusedly resigned.

Knowing he’s already won the argument that’s brewing, Haku glances up long enough to offer his friend a quick smile and then goes back to checking his senbon. “You keep looking east,” he says. “And you look restless, the same way Zabuza did when he’d been in one place too long. He always said it was because he missed Kiri and nowhere else felt like home.”

‘Where is your home, Naruto?’ he does not say.

There’s a long pause, and then a faint sigh before Naruto starts pulling out sealing scrolls and a pack of his own. “You could be a medic-nin if you stayed,” he points out, though he doesn’t sound hopeful that his argument will work.

“And you have a team here,” Haku parries easily. “A team and a sensei and the Godaime Hokage wishing you the best.”

Naruto pauses in his packing, stills with his eyes fixed out the window, towards where the sun will rise in a handful of hours. “Sasuke-teme and Sakura-chan will be fine,” he says, and the loneliness in his tone is something Haku is intimately familiar with. It’s a little boy left alone in the snow, another little boy sitting alone on a swing as parents smile and children laugh. “They’re both going to be great shinobi, and they’ll do well. They make me happy, and they’re precious to me. But…” He trails off, shakes his head, and tries again. “Sakura and Sasuke and Kakashi-sensei and Iruka-sensei will survive without me. I’ll always love them, but Konoha isn’t the place that will make me happiest. That place…it needs me, Haku, more than Konoha does. And I need it, too.”

Haku smiles to himself, just a little, and nods, closing his pack and tying the flap securely closed. “Konoha isn’t the only place to become a medic-nin,” he says firmly. “And I’m hardly about to let you go off alone, Naruto-kun.”

For a long moment, Naruto looks to be debating the merits of arguing further, but Haku levels a steady stare at him and he gives in with a sigh. He rubs a hand over his hair, takes a breath, and then looks up with a sweet, warm grin. “All right. Thank you, Haku. But you know we’re going to have to sneak out, right?”

Haku blinks at that. Naruto has never exactly struck him as the furtive type, and sneaking off in the middle of the night is certainly that. “You…don’t think they’ll let you go if you ask?”

Naruto's mouth twists in momentary indecision, and when he meets Haku's eyes, he looks…nervous. “I know they won’t,” he admits in a rush, “'cause I'm a jinchuuriki. Every major village is supposed to have at least one, to keep the balance of power, and no matter how much they hate me they’re not going to want to let me leave.”

Just like that, all the pieces fall neatly into place. Haku blinks rapidly, sorting things out, and comes across a memory of a grim, redhead boy. “Gaara-san too?” he asks.

Naruto studies his face for a moment before his shoulders relax, the tight line of his body easing a little, and then he nods. “Yeah. Gaara has the Ichibi, and I have the Kyuubi. But my seal stops the demon from touching my mind unless I reach out to it. His doesn’t. That’s why he seems a little crazy.”
If Gaara is ‘a little crazy’, the ocean is ‘a little damp’. Still, Haku’s mother raised him to have at least a touch of tact, so he stuffs the urge to say so tightly back behind his teeth and instead simply nods. He watches Naruto seal the last of a pile of scrolls into a sealing scroll and stow it away before rising to his feet, and follows the blond.

“May I ask where we’re going?” he murmurs as Naruto takes one last look around.

Naruto hesitates, then turns to him, eyes flaring a brilliant blue, like the ocean beneath a summer sun. His mouth is set in a line that goes beyond stubborn, beyond determined—there’s simply no room for doubt or allowance of failure in his heart.

“Uzushio,” he says. “We’re going to Uzushio.”

They are still three days from leaving Konoha, among the last of the Suna shinobi to depart after their unconditional surrender. Gaara knows his siblings are tense and wary, walking as if on pins and cautious of every Konoha shinobi they come across, eager to return home, but…

He is not.

Perhaps it is that he has no attachment to Sunagakure, no fond memories or associations to tie him to it. Perhaps it is that for all he is a creature of sand, Konoha, with its vast swathes of green and humid air and temperate climates, has a strange allure about it. Perhaps it is that here in Konoha, rather than in arid, harsh Suna, Gaara has made his first friend.

And Naruto is still a friend, or is a friend regardless, no matter what hand Gaara had in the invasion and the destruction that followed. No matter whether he has the Ichibi whispering in his head or not. No matter how much blood he has spilled in the name of justifying his own existence. That is…very close to staggering.

Gaara leans back against the window frame, seated on the wide sill as he surveys the nighttime village. He closes his eyes and remembers a rush of wind and water, like a storm brought down to earth, remembers a hand stretched out to him when he’d done absolutely nothing to earn it. Remembers, and thinks.

Because that’s what he wants, that faith, that steadfastness in the face of fear, that ability to hold someone close to his heart. He wants it even though he’s never really had it in any way that wasn’t a lie, not from Yashamaru and not from Temari, who tries to be kind but still flinches whenever he looks at her. Not from Kankuro, who is eternally wary. Not from anyone but Naruto, a complete stranger, with every reason in the world to hate him.

No, Gaara doesn’t want to leave, even if it means staying in this place where he’s an enemy, an invader. That’s hardly anything new, regardless. But it’s not Konoha that holds him here. It’s a boy with a heart too large for him, a boy with blue eyes and a bright smile and a tempest sleeping in his soul. A boy who is just like him, but at the same time not even remotely similar.

A boy who’s creeping over the rooftops right now, actually.

Gaara blinks and leans forward, narrowing his eyes at the sight of a familiar figure slipping through the shadows, furtive enough that no one else likely notices him. A beat, and behind him is someone else—that other friend, the one who had checked Naruto over so frantically when he arrived with the other medic-nin. They’re both moving silently, secretively, and carrying packs.

Something…twinges. Gaara looks down at them, clearly on their way to somewhere else, and just…
wants.

There’s no sense behind it, no logic. He doesn’t even look back at his brother and sister sleeping across the room. Just calls up his sand, careful and slow even though the ANBU who usually watch them are not present, and lets it carry him down from the window and into the street as Naruto and his companion drop to the ground.

“Uzumaki,” he says flatly, crossing his arms over his chest, even though he has no aim, no reason to start a conversation.

Blue eyes settle on him, blinking in slight surprise, and then the other genin offers him a faint smile. “Hey, Gaara,” he answers, and gestures behind him, where the other boy is just emerging from the shadows. Pretty, composed, and powerful, and the whisper of his chakra against Gaara’s skin is both cold and foreign, though not unpleasantly so. “Haku, this is Sabaku no Gaara. Gaara, my friend Haku.”

Haku inclines his head with a faint, polite smile, but his body stays entirely attuned to Naruto, clearly waiting for any cue. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Gaara-san.”

Gaara nods, his eyes also on Naruto. The other jinchuuriki keeps glancing away, turning east, even though dawn is still not yet a thought. He frowns faintly, studying the blond with his pack, the sealing scrolls peeking out of the pouch on his belt, and comes to the realization in an instant.

“You’re leaving,” he says, and it’s very nearly an accusation.

Naruto pauses, looking back at him for a long moment, and then he sighs and scrubs a hand through his hair. “I am,” he admits, slightly weary and a little sad. “Konoha’s fine. There’s somewhere else I need to be right now. Somewhere that’s…home.”

“Home,” Gaara echoes, tasting the word as though it’s something foreign to him. It is, mostly. Home is a thing other people have, a near-myth, and entirely unfamiliar. He studies Naruto for a moment, taking in the whisker-marks on his face, the thrum of overlarge chakra reserves in the air around him, and…thinks. Because Naruto is a jinchuuriki as well, and a home that will accept him means—

“They do not care that you are a demon?” he asks bluntly.

To his surprise, that makes Naruto laugh. He glances east once more, then meets Gaara’s eyes squarely. “No,” he answers with a faint fox-grin, tricky and sly. “That would be hard, since there isn’t much left beyond rubble right now, at least on the surface. It was a home once, though, and I’m going to rebuild it. One stone at a time, if I have to.”

Those eyes of his are enough to wreck someone, Gaara thinks, caught in a blaze of blue that’s so full of determination, stubborn certainty, that it’s almost overwhelming. This home—Gaara has no idea how many pieces it might be in, but he knows, knows bone-deep and without the faintest hint of doubt, that Naruto will drag it back up from mere dust if he has to.

They are just the same, the two of them, at the same time as they are not even remotely similar. But surely, surely, if Naruto is building a home for himself and his friend, who has the same empty-lost eyes that Gaara is so intimately familiar with—

Surely that home could be one for Gaara as well.

A stream of sand slides back up to the hotel window, slips inside, and remerges a few moments later with Gaara’s pack in tow. He accepts it, shoulders it, and silently turns to look at Naruto for direction.
To his credit, Naruto doesn’t attempt to argue. He studies Gaara for a long moment—almost endless, beneath the weight of those blue eyes—and then asks quietly, “Your brother and sister?”

Gaara is not given to emotional expression at the best of times, but that question makes his lips twist, makes him look away as he recalls Temari’s fear, Kankuro’s horror and wariness just barely covered by his bravado. Maybe, maybe with enough effort he could count them as his family. One day perhaps, but far in the future. Far distant, and standing here, faced with a choice between going with the one who openly cares for him now, or returning to those who will not for years, if ever—

Well. It’s a simple choice, even for someone like Gaara.

“East,” he says instead of answering, though perhaps that’s answer enough. “We are going east?”

There’s a brief moment when Haku looks about to protest, but then his dark eyes grow thoughtful and he looks away again, towards the blond boy, younger than both of them, who is nevertheless undeniably their leader. Naruto meets Haku's gaze evenly, smile in place, and then nods to Gaara. “Yeah,” he says cheerfully, resettling his own pack and turning away. “We’ll cut straight across to Hot Springs Country and over to the ocean. There's a small fishing village there, and it’s only a short boat-trip to an island just off the coast. From the island, it’s not even half a day’s journey to Whirlpool Country. We should be able to get passage pretty easily, since Whirlpool’s not entirely isolated. And if we can't, I remember how to get through the reefs well enough, even if I would make a lousy fisherman.”

That last is said like it’s an inside joke, with a faintly sad half-smile tilting Naruto's lips. Wistful, more than melancholy, though it certainly holds regrets.

Gaara looks at Haku, sees that he’s just as much in the dark as Gaara himself, and resigns himself to curiosity, falling into step with the blond. “Whirlpool Country? I don’t believe I have heard of it.”

That earns him another crooked smile, though Naruto doesn’t look away from the horizon and the wall that’s looming before them. “Yeah,” he murmurs, wry and sad and ever so faintly bitter. “Most people haven’t.”

(He thinks of Mito as they slip out of Konoha, right over the wall and into the forest without anyone the wiser. Thinks of Mito the last time he saw her, during one of her rare visits to Uzushio.

She’s tall, especially for a woman, regal and imposing and very, very beautiful, even in her age. She is every bit the wife of the very first Kage, and Naruto-as-Arashi can read the weight of the burden she carries in the set of her shoulders, the lines in her face that speak of some vast inner war.

Naruto is just come from his appointment, the Uzukage’s hat a new weight on his head, blue-and-white robes heavy with ceremony and meaning. But he bows to this woman, to Senju Mito who was once Uzumaki Mito, bows low and deep with all the respect he feels for her. Because it is a terrible thing, to choose to become a sacrifice, to know everything that you are giving up and to surrender it regardless because of duty and honor. All of Uzushio knows what she did that night, knows the repercussions for all the major villages, and they revere her for it, because Uzumaki Mito is one of them and always has been. The very greatest of them, Naruto sometimes thinks.

“Mito-sama,” Naruto murmurs to this woman he has looked up to since childhood, stately and awe-inspiring. “Uzushio is honored by your presence.”

She looks him over, dark eyes weighty and intent, and then smiles faintly. “It is not every day that
Uzushio chooses a new Kage,” she says, her tone light and warm. A hand settles on Naruto's shoulder, urging him upright, and he blinks at her as she steps back, expression softening.

“Sandaime Uzukage,” Mito says thoughtfully. “Another Uzumaki, though that is to be expected. And you are our youngest yet, Arashi-kun, are you not? I remember you as a genin, following along behind Saehara-san like a little duckling, so eager to learn anything she would teach you.” There is a long pause as she studies him, but her smile never wavers. “And now, to see what you have become—she would be proud of you, Arashi-kun. All of Uzushiogakure is proud of you today. You will be a good leader, I think.”

And then she’s gone, sweeping away into the crowd with her retainers falling in behind her, and Naruto can only watch her go in awe and disbelief.

Uzumaki Mito, jinchuuriki of the most powerful bijuu and one of the greatest fuinjutsu masters alive.

Uzumaki Mito, wife of Senju Hashirama and one of the most driving forces for peace in their world.

Mito, who just told him that he would be a good Kage.

He’s giddy and nervous and shaken, disbelieving but so very, very happy.

And he’d though the day couldn’t get any most outstanding.

“Yes, Mito-sama,” he whispers, long after she’s completely disappeared. He ghosts his fingers over the spiral symbol stitched onto the sash of his robe, traces the mark of their village like it’s an oath. “I swear, even if it takes everything I have, I will make Uzushiogakure a name that all will know.”
Intro: Closing, Calando

Chapter Notes

As stated previously, this is the last chapter of the intro section, after which there's a 6-year time-skip and I drop everyone right in the middle of things without a clue what’s going on, because I love torturing people. *heart*

[Calando: Falling away or lowering, i.e. getting slower and quieter.]

Uzushiogakure is a ruin.

Somehow, Naruto failed to expect this, failed to anticipate the true extent of the destruction Kiri’s forces brought to bear on the city. He was dead for it, but that feels like no excuse at all in the face of…this.

“I have never seen such a thing.” Haku murmurs at his right elbow, voice muted with horror, wide eyes taking in the expanse of rubble that stretches all the way to the shining sea.

“Yeah.” Naruto smiles faintly, the expression entirely humorless. “Kiri was…thorough.”

He looks out from their place high atop one of the surrounding hills, down past dull-brown debris, and somehow that feels like the biggest tragedy of all. Uzushio was always a bright city, red and gold and white, touched with Whirlpool Country’s colors of sky-blue and dove-grey. Now there’s little of that left, only a few scattered chunks of bright red roof tiles, a handful of spots of badly faded and tarnished gilding.

There will be bones among the rubble, Naruto knows, and wraps his arms around himself, gripping his elbows tightly to fight the shudder working its way down his spine. The bodies of his people, of Uzushio’s shinobi and civilians, people he remembers. People he knows. His genin teammates, Haru with his green eyes and crooked smile, Fuyu with her sly and quiet humor. Saehara-sensei’s grave is somewhere in there, though she died before the invasion. Yui, and he wonders if she ever knew that it was Reisi who betrayed them. Mio, with her hair ornaments and kindness and multitude of hidden knives. Ookami Shunka, grey-haired and dark-eyed, glasses forever slipping down her nose. She’d been leading the defense, the last time Naruto saw her, bellowing orders as Kiri shinobi tried to reach the hospital. He wonders how she died.

The same way as everyone else, most likely—cut down and killed, for no reason beyond Kiri’s fear of the power Uzushio held.

A shoulder bumps his, a soft and glancing touch but still enough to knock Naruto out of his thoughts, and he looks up to see Gaara at his side, staring out over the ruin. His mouth is a tight line, the only crack in his indifference, but Naruto is…glad for it. Glad to show him something besides blood that gains some sort of reaction. Gaara needs to feel, to understand. He’s shut himself off for too long, and that can't be anywhere near healthy.

“Sorry, Gaara. I was thinking,” he apologizes, shifting slightly. “What is it?” Part of him wants to run, to leave and never come back to the scene of this tragedy. The rest of him…
The rest of him *burns*, *aches*, and Naruto knows that pain will stay with him until Uzushio is fully restored. There's no escaping this. He's not entirely sure he would even if he could.

“This is to be our home?” Gaara asks, tone inscrutable. Naruto can't tell if he’s disappointed or indifferent or simply stating a fact.

But it poses a good question, and Naruto tries not to sigh too wearily as he moves forward, picking his way down the slope. They're already on Uzushio ground, even if they haven’t reached the city yet. He can feel it in the earth beneath them, a subtle, humming thrum that vibrates through his very bones. Uzushio knows he's back, and is making her pleasure known. Haku and Gaara can feel it well, judging by the quiet tension in their expressions as they step forward, past the seal-carved stones that mark the boundary.

“It will be,” Naruto says at length, brushing his fingers over one deeply carved seal. It sparks with life at the fleeting touch, a touch of chakra that sets it to glowing. There's a sharp snap, a crackle, and the spark of golden chakra leaps away to the next barrier stone, bringing it to life as well before it continues onward like chain lightning. Naruto watches it disappear into the distance, pausing to follow it with his senses. Uzushio is a large city, but even so, he can feel the awakening rush of the outer fortifications, seals designed to keep out anyone not specifically invited in by a citizen of Uzushio.

It’s an easily defeated protection, as Reisi proved, but it will be enough until Naruto can rework the seals.

“A fixer-upper,” Haku murmurs, his usual deadpan humor, as he follows close behind.

Were it anyone else, Naruto might take offense, but he knows Haku doesn’t mean it unkindly. Hell, Haku barely has an unkind bone in his body, talk of killing his heart aside.

“Could be worse,” Naruto offers, injecting a note of cheer into his voice. At the very edge of the rubble, he stops and drops to one knee, shifting a few chunks of stone out of the way to reach a curved section of pillar, thick and intricately carved. He runs his hand over it, then glances up, looking for the others like it that should be nearby. “These are the structural supports laid into every main building in each district. Theoretically, if we can get to the keystone, and provided I’m not forgetting something important in how the founders originally made this place, I should be able to… call the buildings back together, more or less. Only the main ones, but it will be a start.”

“You used seals in our battle.” Gaara sounds interested, watching Naruto with his arms crossed and one brow faintly raised.

Naruto winces at the memory. He’d attempted to use the reverse of the seal that he’d put Haku to sleep with on the bridge, but hadn’t had time to tailor or tweak it. In the end, instead of waking Gaara up, he’d given Shukaku the sealing equivalent of a very strong caffeine boost. Definitely not his best moment. “Well, *I tried,*** he offers gamely. “But these kinds of seals make that one look like finger painting. They're a huge part of Uzushio, and I mean that literally. Our Sandaime wrote these into every aspect of the village—in case of an earthquake or a tsunami, originally, but, well.” He shrugs and rises to his feet, wiping some dirt off his pants. “They should work just as well now, if enough sections are mostly intact.”

Haku is watching him, quiet and considering, the way he’s spent a good amount of time doing ever since they left Konoha. “You know all of this, although this place was obviously destroyed decades ago,” he says softly, thoughtfully. “And you keep saying ‘our’. *Our* city, *our* Sandaime—Naruto-kun, I thought you were from Konoha.”
“I am,” Naruto protests. “Or, well, I am now. This time around. But I remember a time when I was from Uzushio, if that makes sense. She did something, as far as I can tell, to keep me from being reincarnated normally, without any memories. So it’s all still up here.” He taps the side of his head, and can’t quite fight the smile that comes. Because it’s a ruin, a wreck full of bones and bodies, but it’s still here and he can still feel Uzushio herself singing beneath his feet, warm and welcoming. “All of it. Right up until the second I died. And I’m not about to let my home stay ruined. Not if I can help it.”

Gaara looks around them for a long moment, expression unreadable, and then nods just once. “There will be too many to bury, even if we dig the graves with Doton jutsus,” he says bluntly, though not harshly. “We can build a pyre and then erect a memorial afterwards.”

With a sigh that makes him feel positively ancient, Naruto goes to his knees, pressing his palm against the cool, damp earth, and breathes out.


“Yeah,” he manages after a moment, and if his voice is rough, at least Haku and Gaara are kind enough not to mention it. “A…pyre is probably best. But we should find the keystone first. It will cut down on the amount of rubble we have to dig through. And I can let everyone descended from a main Uzushio bloodline know that we’re rebuilding. Maybe some of them will want to come back.”

Haku offers him a hand and a small, warm smile. “They will,” he says firmly. “People will do just about anything for a home that’s truly their own, Naruto-kun.”

Gaara nods, solemn and silent, and doesn’t look away.

“Right,” Naruto breathes out, feeling hope and optimism rising up within his chest like bubbles of effervescent light. *Right.* Because Uzushio has been destroyed once, but she’s still here, still living and waiting and holding on to her faith that he—Naruto, Arashi, either or both—can make things better. Make things *right.* He’s all but promised her that he will, just like he promised Mito that he would make Uzushio into something great.

He didn’t get the chance to fulfil those promises the first time, but that’s what second chances are for, isn't it?

*This time*, Naruto swears to himself, taking Haku’s hand. *This time will be different.*

Sasuke wakes to dawn light and birds singing and a creeping, invasive sense of wrongness like a miasma in the air. He opens his eyes, stiff and still in the hard hospital bed, and immediately thinks, *Something’s happened.*

He sits up, taking in the room—empty, thankfully, despite Ino and Sakura's ridiculous persistence in the face of Sasuke's continued indifference—and then the quiet street he can just see through the window. There’s nothing, no hint of panic on the faces he can glimpse, no furtive motions, no suspicious characters. And yet something feels *wrong,* as though the sky has somehow suddenly turned green or directions reversed—something subtle and yet jarring all at once. Sasuke is almost tempted to activate his Sharingan and see if it’s something his normal eyes just can't pick up.

Before he can—though doubtless a medic will come in to yell at him for needlessly wasting chakra—the door to his room swings open, creaking lightly, and a familiar form slips through the gap, shoulders faintly rounded with exhaustion and silver hair nowhere near as flyaway as normal.
Kakashi pauses on the threshold, looking like he’s aged ten years since Sasuke saw him last, a little over twenty-four hours ago, now, because Sasuke's been sleeping, his body finishing the work Tsunade started. There are new lines in his face and a new grief in his gaze, and Sasuke has never looked at their teacher and thought broken, but right now…he could. Easily, he could.

“Something’s happened,” he says, feelings—dread, unease, anger—curling and twisting into a knot in the pit of his stomach. “What is it?”

Kakashi hesitates, just for a moment, but even that’s more than Sasuke has patience for, because the last time he felt this way was waking up after Itachi slaughtered his entire clan and surely, surely there's nothing else he can lose now, right?

Kakashi takes a slow, deep breath, looks up, and proves him wrong with two simple words.

“Naruto’s gone.”

For an endless moment, Sasuke stares uncomprehending. Apparently when Tsunade fixed his mind she somehow destroyed his ears, because he can’t have heard what he just did, can’t can’t can’t because Naruto can’t be gone, not in any sense of the word.

“Gone,” he repeats, and even on that single word his voice breaks. “What—what do you mean, gone?”

Another pause, pained and straining, and Kakashi crosses the room with weary, dragging steps to sit on the foot of Sasuke’s bed. His left hand is clenched into a white-knuckled fist, and the other is dug deep into a pocket—tells, obvious ones that no experienced shinobi would show unless deep in the midst of an emotional upheaval or a complete breakdown, and Sasuke can't tell which of the two this is.

“His apartment’s empty,” the Copy-Nin says, and the tone tries for flat but falls miles short. “No one’s seen him in almost three days, and his chakra isn't anywhere within Konoha. It…looks like he left of his own volition, but we haven’t ruled out kidnapping. It’s possibly they just wanted us to think he left on his own.”

Sasuke scoffs before he can stop himself. “Then they obviously didn’t know the dobe very well,” he retorts, swinging his legs off the bed. “He wouldn’t do that.”

Kakashi just watches him, tired and old. “Haku is gone, and their packs. Team 7’s photo, too.”

“No!” Sasuke denies, surprising even himself with the vehemence in that one word. “Naruto wouldn’t leave!”

“He wants to become Hokage,” a tremulous voice puts in, and Sasuke and Kakashi both look up to find Sakura in the doorway, wide-eyed and pale. “He can’t do that outside the village. Sasuke’s right.” She slips across the room, eyes on their teacher. “Kakashi-sensei, you know that, right? Naruto would never betray the village.”

Kakashi’s hesitation says more than words ever will. He drops his gaze, avoiding their eyes, and runs a hand through his limp hair. “Naruto didn’t have…an easy time, growing up,” he says at length. “You two are fairly observant; I assume you noticed. If that became too much… And with the loss of the Sandaime and failing to become a chuunin, Naruto might have decided he was…better off elsewhere. The Hokage is putting a team together to look for him—”

“I'm going with them,” Sasuke says immediately. His heart is beating a tattoo in his chest, gone gone gone, and there's something wrapped tightly around his lungs, cold and immovable. He slides out of
bed and stands, ignoring the wobble as he does so, because this is important.

He remembers, can't forget those nights they met each other after training, walking back to their apartments. Both tired, both too exhausted for more than a weary wave or a grunt in greeting, but Sasuke remembers and he'd thought Naruto felt it, too, what was between them. Thought he felt it when they took down the Demon Brothers together, when they faced down Zabuza together, when Sasuke looked at Naruto and saw someone to acknowledge. Naruto with his wind and water and strange brilliance at the oddest moments, his ragtag plans that nevertheless work beautifully, the way he smiles at Sasuke without wanting anything in return but simple friendship.

He'd thought—

But he'd been wrong, apparently.

“Someone took him,” he grates out, meeting Kakashi's eye, and then Sakura's. “Or someone made him leave. I'm going to drag the idiot back here and beat it out of him, and then we can fix the problem.”

Sakura and Kakashi glance at each other, then back at him. Sakura is still pale, but her lips have thinned into a firm line and there's steel in her spine as she straightens. Kakashi nods slowly. “You might,” he says carefully, “not have time for your revenge, with a manhunt like this.”

Sasuke grits his teeth and looks away, hands clenching into fists at his side.

Naruto beat him at spars, surpassed him in ninjutsu. Naruto looked at him and saw, not just another classmate but someone who could be a rival. Not just a teammate but a friend.

He thinks of his brother, about revenge. Thinks about Itachi killing so very, very many men and women and children just to get stronger.

Thinks about his own quest to get stronger, the cursed seal on his neck, and wonders. Would I do that? If I had to do that to kill Itachi, would I?

The most terrifying thing of all is that he’s not sure.

“That’s…fine,” he says evenly, when he can speak without his voice shaking. “If Itachi dies before I find him, I’ll have had my revenge anyway.”

He would have left it to Naruto, if he had died on that bridge. Left it to Naruto and been content, because Naruto would have carried out his revenge, his and the clan’s. In the name of saving the one person Sasuke would have trusted with such a vast part of himself, waiting a few years to accomplish his goal is…acceptable.

Sasuke will learn how to have patience. It can only serve him well in the long run. And in the meantime, he’ll look for Naruto, he’ll find him, and he’ll bring him home.

Kakashi nods and rises from the bed, clasping a hand on his shoulder before he steps away.

“Well then,” he says, and there's a spark of something very much like hope buried in his voice. “Let’s go find Naruto, then.”

Uzushio’s heart lies deep beneath the earth, heavily protected with seals and barriers. Naruto is alone as he walks down the long corridor, lit only with the blue light from the marks on the wall. Haku had
protested and Gaara had frowned when he’d told them they couldn’t accompany him, but they’d remained on the surface despite that.

Only the Uzukage ever comes down here. Only the Uzukage knows the secrets of this place.

Naruto runs his hand along the wall, setting the seals to blazing before they resettle with a soft crackle. Still intact, the entirety of this place, because even Uzumaki Reisi, studious as he was, couldn’t find more than passing mention of it in any book. Only words carry the secret, words and a single, impossibly well-protected document in the Uzukage’s office. Nothing else, for circumstances just like this.

Three more steps, another brush of his fingers over the carvings in the stone, and the doors at the end of the corridor swing open under their own power, as quiet as a whisper.

The chamber beyond them is small, twelve paces across at most, a circular room with a pale floor engraved with hundreds of names. Naruto pauses to look at them. Uzumaki is the deepest, but all the rest are here as well, Ookami and Ginrei and Suoh and so many more. All the clans boasting at least four families and twelve members, so long as a handful of those members served as shinobi. All here, every name darkened with blood given by the head of the family, all having contributed at least a touch of chakra to the keystone.

The keystone itself is unremarkable, a hexagonal piece of marble carved with a series of interlocking seals, all of them deceptively simple. But Naruto can feel the thrumming, throbbing power of it, this simple chunk of stone, and he crosses the room without pause or fear, and Uzushio whispers eagerly around him.

He drops to his knees, sinks his teeth into his thumb until he draws blood, and smears it across the seals without hesitation.

“Come home,” he says, and his voice—Arashi’s voice—echoes like he’s speaking from some great mountaintop, rather than within a small, enclosed room. “Uzushio has lain in ruin for too long. If you’ve ever sought a land of your own, a place for freedom, for safety, come home. Uzushio is waiting.” He pauses, and unbidden a small smile crosses his face. “Your Kage is waiting. *Come home.*”

Chakra flares, a blinding rush, and Naruto closes his eyes. He can feel it in his bones, beneath his skin. Can feel the surge and rush as old seals flare to life, called back together by blood and chakra and Uzushio’s will. They’re reassembling, rising, buildings and roads and arches, structures long since reduced to chunks of stone and piles of rubble standing up once more as the seals burned into them return them to how they should be.

Not all of them, but that will come in time.

Not everything, but enough.

Naruto opens his eyes and grins, because he can feel it in his very soul, Uzushio’s cry stretching out across the length and breadth of the Elemental Countries, seeking those who bear the blood contained within this chamber.

*Come home,* he thinks, and all around him Uzushio *sings.*

*Come home.*
Like an echo, like light, like dawn breaking over hills and thunder rumbling between mountain peaks and ripples spreading across still water, Uzushio's voice rolls across the land.

In Konoha, asleep at her desk and dreaming of a man with white hair and a handsome smile, Tsunade sighs and turns her head, ignoring the whisper in favor of a home that needs her.

In Oto, a young woman draws herself up short, red hair swirling around her shoulders, her heart suddenly thundering in her chest. At the same moment, glass shatters with a sharp crash, and she looks up to meet the startled gaze of the man coming down the hall. Black eyes framed by a messy fall of ash-grey hair hold her own, and they both glance down at the dropped beaker and then, as one, turn to look southeast.

In Kumo, an old man with his hair bleached white by time stumbles to a halt and simply stands there, not hearing his daughter-in-law's sudden, worried questions. There are tears on his face, even as he smiles, even as he laughs, and he turns southward without hesitation.

In Ame, deep within the darkness, a man lowers his head and cries, shoulders shaking and wasted body trembling.

On a rutted road somewhere near Earth Country's border, a redheaded couple pauses, steps faltering. Around them, behind them, their family does the same, the merchant train grinding to a halt as one by one they look to the east.

All across the Elemental Countries, in every nation, in a thousand forgotten places, people falter and freeze and turn their faces towards the source of a cry that resounds in their very blood.

*Home,* it says, a man's voice and a woman's voice, the voice of someone only the oldest generations remember entwined with the voice of someone who is something both more and less than human.

*Come home,* it tells them.

And they do.)
First Movement: Impromptu Introductions

Chapter Notes

I have this done and edited and all that fun stuff, and people seem to be interested, so I figure I might as well post. There will be another chapter next Tuesday as well, no worries. Because this story is also eating my brain. -.-'

[Impromptu: A short piano piece, often improvisational and intimate in character.]

Kabuto dreams of it more often than he will ever admit to sober. Dreams of dawn on the ocean and a white beach stretching out before him as he steps off the swells and onto the shore, Karin on his right. Kimimaro is on the other side, a guard from Orochimaru, who is…interested in this unexpected occurrence. The breeze is cool and salt-scented, and before them, beyond the gentle roll of the dunes, a city rises.

It’s battered, nearly ruined, but a handful of buildings are standing, pale and shining between piles of rubble. White stone and red roof tiles, golden-brown streets that stretch away until they disappear beneath the debris, and it’s nothing special, just a village destroyed by war, but—

But Kabuto’s breath catches in his throat regardless. But Kabuto freezes on the last dune, unable to take another step from the sheer wonder that’s beating in his veins. There’s no logical reason for it, no foundation for that or the ease that suddenly came over him the moment his sandal met solid ground, but it’s there nevertheless.

From the look on Karin’s face, she feels it as well.

They trade glances, and even though he’s rarely spoken to her before, she a jailor and he a medic and Orochimaru's personal assistant, there are no words needed between them. With Kimimaro trailing behind, they stride forward, up into the remains of Uzushiogakure.

“There are three chakra signatures to the left,” Karin murmurs, leading them in that direction, and there's a faint smile on her face. “One of them is cold, and one is…dark, but the last is just…beautiful.”

As they round the corner, Kabuto almost falls over his own feet with surprise. Uzumaki Naruto, the dead-last Konoha genin who somehow still managed to give Orochimaru pause in a fight, is seated on a fallen column, Sabaku no Gaara on his left and Momochi Zabuza’s former apprentice on his right. He’s smiling, warm and bright, and there's something about him that’s very, very different than the slightly out-of-place boy Kabuto remembers.

“Hey,” he says cheerfully. “You guys are the first to get here.”

“Uzumaki?” Kabuto asks warily, even as his thoughts race ahead, trying to connect the pieces. Naruto is here, has been waiting for them. They're the first—of how many? How many people heard the call that he and Karin did, and what is the connection between them?

But before he can ask anything, before he even has time to open his mouth, Naruto is in front of him, and the expression on his face would be far more suited to a man twice his age. Slowly enough for it
not to be a threat, he reaches out to touch the edge of Kabuto’s hair, and his smile turns wistful.

“You look like Shunka,” he says, the tone both fond and sad. “She sucked at medical ninjutsu, though—couldn’t even fix a papercut. Still, her younger sister was good at it, one of the best in Uzushio. Maybe you're descended from her.”

There’s a kind of ringing silence in Kabuto’s head, a fine trembling in the hands that have always, always been so absolutely steady. He swallows hard, fighting down thoughts of orphanages and identities and the only mother he’d ever had trying to kill him, and worse yet not recognizing him. “You…know who I am?” he asks softly, and it’s astounding that his voice doesn’t shake.

The look Naruto gives him is considering, thoughtful. “Well,” he answers easily, “I know your clan. I'm not entirely sure how you're related, but I can tell that you are. Ookami clan coloring is pretty hard to mistake.” With a smile, he steps back, turning to Karin, and his face lights up. “Oh! You're another Uzumaki!”

Karin’s eyes widen. “You too?” she asks, and then quickly adds, “No, no, your chakra reserves are definitely Uzumaki. Are you the one rebuilding this place?”

Zabuza’s apprentice is smiling, and Gaara is looking away but there’s faint contentment in his eyes. Naruto steps back to join his two companions, and like a cloak falling over him he’s suddenly more. More himself, more than just a child and an orphan, more than just a runaway Konoha genin.

“If I am,” he says, conviction lighting his features like a solar flare. “It’s been a ruin for too long. We need somewhere to settle, to come back to. Everyone does.”

And Kabuto…wonders at those words. Feels wonder, rather than confusion, even though they have the ring of a Kage’s absolute faith coming from a genin’s mouth. Because they feel like hope, and home, and safety. Feel right and steady, even when nothing has since he left the orphanage and Nonō’s care.

He looks around him, taking in the marks of work clearing stone and wood, the skeletons carefully laid out on a cleared patch of ground, the handful of buildings rising tall and proud. Thinks of clans and family and looking like someone.

Ookami, he thinks, and smiles to himself. I am…an Ookami.

“Where do you want us to start?” he asks, quietly stubborn, and meets Naruto's eyes, just daring him to refuse.

But he doesn’t. He simply grins, bright and warm and welcoming, and steps away.

“Let me show you,” he says, and leads them deeper into their new village.

And then, of course, Kabuto wakes up.

An explosion goes off outside his window, followed by a scream—not fear, certainly, as the civilians have long since adjusted to living in the madness that is Uzumaki Naruto/Arashi’s Home for Wayward Social Rejects and Various Nutjobs, but anger, because Fū has a bad habit of playing tricks on Suigetsu, who doesn’t appreciate it in the least. And then more shrieking joins in, because Karin hates collateral damage even when it’s Suigetsu getting his face pounded into various unyielding surfaces, and Kabuto groans and drags his blankets up over his head, trying in vain to shut out the noise.
A rustle of fabric shows he’s not alone in his room, but Kabuto doesn’t even bother looking. “Am I allowed to send them back to Orochimaru giftwrapped and tied with a bow?” he asks, though the tone is resigned. “Please?”

The other man huffs a quiet laugh, even as he slides the curtains open to let in the morning light. The noise level, unfortunately, increases. “You'll have to take that up with Gaara-kun,” he answers. “He’s the one in charge until Uzukage-sama returns. But I think Naruto-sama might object to having half of his top shinobi deported.”

“Can you picture it, though?” Kabuto counters, leaning up on his elbows and eyeing his friend, who is one of the few sane people in this madhouse, container of the Rokubi or not. “It would be so quiet.”

Utakata raises an eyebrow, entirely undisturbed by the surge of fire that shoots up over the streets. “Eerily so, I imagine. Get up, Kabuto-kun. If you're not at the hospital within the hour, all of your minions will likely start to self-destruct without you.”

Kabuto prays for patience, even as he levers himself out of bed. Had he knows that this would be the result, he’d have rejected Naruto’s request that he be Chief Medic out of hand, and probably fled the country for good measure. “Shouldn’t you be with Gaara?” he asks as he dresses. “Especially if Karin is out there, rather than acting as his assistant?”

“Our dear jounin commander is with his team.” Utakata’s voice is dry. “I believe he has a similar reaction to you, when faced with…antics. We’ll be lucky if he doesn’t abdicate before the end of the week, let alone before Uzukage-sama gets back.”

Today is Thursday. Kabuto calculates the odds, and wryly concludes that Utakata is probably exactly correct. “Is there a contingency plan for if he does?” he asks curiously, even as he heads out of his apartment with Utakata a step behind.

Utakata grimaces. “Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that,” he murmurs, following Kabuto out the window and down to the street, and then turning to the left. He raises a hand in quick farewell. “Go to the hospital before I'm forced to deal with all of the paperwork that will come with the medics revolting. I must find Hotaru.”

“Good luck,” Kabuto offers with a faint smile, and he gets another grimace in return. The girl is a terror, truly, and Utakata is the only one who can even begin to keep her in check.

“Hopefully, Uzukage-sama will return quickly,” Utakata mutters, shaking his head. “And if he doesn’t, I'm not going to be held responsible for my actions.”

“Haku is with him,” Kabuto feels obligated to point out. “He’ll keep Naruto in line.”

“It’s not so much what Naruto-sama will do that worries me, but what I will do when I go to retrieve him. Beg, perhaps. Or cry.” Utakata shakes his head and disappears around the corner, and Kabuto snorts softly as he realizes just who is third in line to take control of the village after the jounin commander. The jounin sub-commander, of course, and that just happens to be Utakata.

“My condolences,” he murmurs, even though the other man is out of sight, and then turns on his heel and heads for the hospital to see just what’s managed to go wrong today.

“Argh,” Ino huffs, stretching her long legs out in front of her as she sinks further down in her chair. “Damn, why can't they just rename this ‘chuunin babysitting duty’ and be done with it? Then at least
we’d know what we were getting into. We’re jounin, damn it! Where’s my well-paid, glory-filled A-rank mission?”

Eyes fixed on the pile of reports in front of him, Sasuke grunts an agreement. “And to think, I spent two years traveling with that perverted freak of a sage for my promotion,” he mutters, and then firmly locks away all thought of the Toad Sage and twenty-four very long months spent on the road, looking for leads. Some things are best forgotten. Quickly. Thoroughly.

Ino’s growl is low, but deadly in its threat level, and she cracks her knuckles for good measure. “Freaking pervert better stay the hell away from any bathhouse within a hundred miles of me,” she snarls, blue eyes narrowing sharply in warning. “After last time—”

That, at least, makes Sasuke pull his gaze away from the papers in front of him—it’s just another disappointment anyways, so it doesn’t matter. Blond, yes, blue-eyed, yes, but the cheek markings are stage paint and the man a wandering entertainer, not a missing-nin. “After last time,” he cuts in dryly, “Jiraiya flinches whenever I so much as mention either you or Sakura, and he’s still trying to get rid of some of the bruises.”

The only response is a sunny smile and a toss of Ino’s head that sends her long ponytail flipping back over her shoulder. “After the way he was drooling and giggling, he got off lightly,” she retorts. “We should have beaten him to death.”

“No argument,” Sasuke mutters, discarding the folder on the top of the stack and opening the next one. Half a beat later he rolls his eyes and tosses it to the side as well. Somehow he can’t see Naruto, regardless of his status as a missing-nin, going into the human trafficking business. “Incompetent morons,” he growls. “What the hell am I even paying them for?”

“To kill trees via large and entirely unnecessary amounts of paperwork?” his partner suggests dryly, snatching the next report before he can look at it. “Oooh, does this mean Naruto abandoned us to join the…” She squints at the name. “Is this even handwriting, or is it black worm trails? Geez. So Naruto’s part of the Great Gaizu’s Traveling Attractions Show now? As a…a dancing girl?”

Sasuke resists the urge to slam his head down on the table. “That would be Sen,” he sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I made the mistake of telling him about Naruto’s Sexy Jutsu, and I think he’s obsessed.”

Ino laughs and lets the folder drop to the ground, where it settles in the dirt with a sad plop. “He did make a sexy girl,” she admits freely, picking up another and fanning herself lightly with it. “Six years now. I wonder what he looks like. A stud, you think? Or more effeminate? That can be hot, too.”

“Like a dobe,” Sasuke says stubbornly, giving up on working with Ino in this kind of mood and crossing his arms over his chest. He hasn’t let himself think about Naruto as anything other than the twelve-year-old who vanished, at least not in the light of day. Because the twelve-year-old is the one who disappeared, who’s the entire reason Sasuke allowed himself to be dragged along with Jiraiya the Perverted Wonder for two years, shaking down contacts and feeling out spy networks for any scraps of information. That boy is why Sasuke has been establishing his own networks, and even if they can’t rival Jiraiya’s yet, he’s well on his way to being a spymaster in his own right.

Anything for information. Anything for a single, solitary clue as to Naruto’s whereabouts.

Ino is the only one of the Rookie Nine beside Sasuke himself who doesn’t give in to moroseness when Naruto is mentioned. She doesn’t subtly hint that it’s been too long to have any hope of finding him, the way Sakura does, or call Sasuke a fool to have kept looking so long, like Kiba does. Doesn’t stutter and turn away, like Hinata, or go grim and silent like Shikamaru, or sigh resignedly,
like Shino and Choji. She actually talks about him, smiles at the memory of the other blond, and Sasuke is unspakably grateful to her for it. Maybe she started it as a way to get closer to her crush, but they’ve all grown up a lot over the last six years, and now there’s only honesty behind it.

As if reading his mind, Ino smiles, tipping her chair back as she arches into a long, lithe stretch. “Mn,” she hums. “Let a girl fantasize in peace, Sasuke-kun. It’s not like you’re doing anything to fuel my fantasies.”

Sasuke rolls his eyes. “Aren’t you engaged?” he points out dryly.

Ino waves a dismissive hand. “Eh. It’s Shikamaru. And as much as I like being on top all the time, a change of pace is a nice thing to think about.”

That gets a full-body cringe in response. Sasuke has become…reluctantly fond of Ino, but any thoughts on Shikamaru’s sex life are unwelcome, damaging, and entirely unwarranted. “Ugh. I think I’m going to be sick.”

“Hey!” But she’s laughing, even as she punches him in the shoulder. “I’ll have you know that I have impeccable taste. Some rocks just need more…polishing than others to make them into gems any girl would dream of owning.”

“If by ‘polishing’ you mean ‘daily beatings’.”

“Six of one, half dozen of another.” Ino shrugs, then twists to peer out the window at the main gate off to their left. “Damn it. Can’t even one exciting person be travelling into Konoha today? Being ‘Standby Jounin Gate Guard’ is great on paper, but I’m going to die of boredom sometime within the next half-hour if nothing changes.”

“And the last time we had someone exciting visit the village was…?”

“Well, I don’t know about you, but I thought that guy with the spear was fairly interesting.”

Sasuke arches a disbelieving brow at her. “The one who claimed his spear was made out of the bones of the Sage of Six Paths and would disintegrate anyone it came into contact with, so we should cede control of Konoha to him immediately?”

“Well, it was certainly fun watching Tsunade-sama dropkick him right back over the wall ten seconds after he walked in.” Ino tips her head, scanning the folder she’s still holding, and then tosses it aside to join the others. There’s quite a pile of rejects already, and as the daughter of Konoha’s former Chief of Intelligence Sasuke trusts her judgment enough that he leaves them where they are. Ino knows what to look for. “Hell, Sasuke-kun. If I were a suspicious sort of person, I might think all of these so-called spies were using you for their own personal gain and not living up to their end of the bargain.” With a grimace, she discards another.

“I’ve had my suspicions.” Sasuke very carefully doesn’t add the but I still think it’s worth it. He doesn’t have to, because from the glance Ino gives him, her lips twisted into a wry, crooked smile, she understands.

Before she can answer, though, their headsets come to life with a crackle that makes both of them bolt out of their seats and lunge for their weapons.

“Someone’s coming,” Kotetsu murmurs, just barely loud enough to be heard, and Sasuke has to restrain himself from sprinting for the gate. Not out of worry for the two chūnin—Kotetsu and Izumo are more than capable of handling themselves most of the time, and Sasuke and Ino’s presence is pretty much just for invading army scenarios—but because they’ve been sitting in this damned
room for six hours without a single trip out. They're both getting desperate.

“I see them, too,” Izumo agrees. “Three—no, four of them. The man in front, he’s carrying…”

“It’s suspicious-looking,” Kotetsu chimes in, voice tight, and Ino's got one of her long knives in hand and a bloodthirsty little half-smile on her face in anticipation.

“What?” Sasuke finally grits out, unable to hold back any longer. “What is it?”

There's a long moment of tense, breathless silence, and then Izumo says, entirely too cheerfully, “Oops, sorry, false alarm. That’s a goat.”

With a hiss like a popped balloon, Ino deflates, sagging back into her chair. “You!” she hisses. “You little bastards!”

The only thing coming from the other end of the link is Kotetsu's laughter and Izumo's snickering.

Sasuke growls and throws himself into his seat. “Fuck,” he huffs. “See if I'm ever nice to a chuunin again.”

“You're nice to chuunin?” Ino asks skeptically, arching a delicately shaped brow. “For the love of little green apples, why?”

It takes a second to think that one over, and Sasuke feels slightly vindicated when he can't remember any such incidents of kindness happening previously. “Well, if I was ever going to be, I've changed my mind.”

“Good choice,” Ino affirms, relaxing the tension from her muscles with a sigh. She flips her knife through her fingers, then sheathes it so quickly it seems to vanish from sight.

Sasuke approves with a nod. “You’ve gotten better.”

“Asuma-sensei’s been training with me,” she explains blithely, stretching once more before settling with her fingers laced over her bare stomach, legs extended and crossed at the ankles. “Lee beat me last time we sparred, even though I was using ninjutsu and genjutsu and my knives, and since Sakura was watching I'm never going to live it down. But I'll win next time, you can bet on it.”

“Lee’s a monster,” Sasuke says flatly, remembering—not without an internal wince—his own sparring session with the older boy.

Ino huffs out a laugh. “Yeah, but Sakura beat me too last time we fought, and with her promotion she’s been insufferable enough lately. It doesn’t help that Lee is ridiculously romantic and she rubs that in my face continuously, seeing as I'm stuck with the Great Lazy Lump of Konoha.”

Sasuke is so very, very unspeakably relieved that most members of his fan club have moved on to greener pastures, as it were—maybe a little too literally, in Sakura's case. Ino and Sakura more than all the others combined, because they were always the most trouble. Though, granted, it’s been a good four years since the obsession faded. Ino had jumped Shikamaru while Sasuke was traveling with Jiraiya, and they’d been happily otherwise engaged when he got back.

As for Sakura, the two of them had gotten into a knock-down, drag-out fight about six weeks later when Sasuke refused to give up on looking for Naruto. Things were said, tempers snapped, and in the end Sakura had punched Sasuke through a wall, stalked off, and reappeared the next day looking both a great deal more relaxed and quite a bit more ruffled than normal, with Lee floating after her on a cloud of pure romantic bliss. They’ve been far better with each other since, though Sasuke knows
Naruto is still a bit of a sore point between them. Sakura has more than once accused him of being obsessed, and while Sasuke will never admit to it aloud, he can't quite argue.

“She did become a tokubetsu jounin first,” he feels the need to point out, in his former teammate’s defense.

Ino waves that away, though she still looks slightly miffed at the memory. “Technicality. Medic-nin occupy a unique category within the shinobi ranks, given their specialized skillset and the requirement of their presence in high-risk situations such as open combat, where lower-ranked shinobi would be a hindrance to the operation. Therefore, when promoted, most by default qualify for the rank of tokubetsu jounin.”

Sasuke shoots the blonde an amused glance. “You memorized that from the handbook just to quote it back at Sakura, didn’t you?”

The answering grin is close to blinding. “I’d like to see proof before I answer any accusations leveled against me, Sasuke-kun, thank you.” There’s a pause as they both halfheartedly page through a few more files, and then, apropos of nothing, Ino says, “I’m…really glad you’re not a bastard like you used to be, Sasuke-kun.”

“I thought it was part of my charm,” Sasuke deflects, but he carefully doesn’t look up. It’s true, he knows. He was a first class bastard, and part of him (an achingly, appallingly large part) wonders if that wasn’t why Naruto left in the first place.

Almost unconsciously, he presses a hand over the dormant and sealed mark on his neck, which no one has been able to remove. It’s…a symbol now, more than anything. A symbol of what he almost let happen, almost became—very likely would have, if Naruto hadn’t provided just enough distraction at exactly the right moment.

But Naruto gave that distraction, vanishing into the dawn as he did, and it took Sasuke two years on the road, constantly moving, with only the company of the lecherous Toad Sage, to come to a realization. Two years of scanning every crowd they came across for blond hair and blue eyes and a brilliant smile, of studying every battlefield, empty or occupied, that they passed for signs of Fuuton and Suiton used together. Two years of lying on hard-packed ground and staring up at a dark sky and thinking, because there was little else to do when he was too exhausted from training to even sleep.

Two years before he realized that Itachi had been goading him, that night, pushing him towards something. Sasuke is nothing if not bullheaded and as stubborn as a particularly obstinate boulder, and the sudden comprehension had drawn him up short, aggravated and furious and hurt and bewildered. Because why? What purpose could Itachi possibly have had driving Sasuke down this path? Did he want another Uchiha to test his strength against?

If that’s the answer, Sasuke is hardly about to oblige him. He’ll get stronger, of course, advance as far as he can, but right now it’s with a different goal in mind.

Oh, he’ll still take his revenge, if it’s presented, and eagerly at that. But it’s not his entire existence anymore, which is…better. Both easier and harder, but…manageable.

For the first time since he was seven, Sasuke is living for himself, and he’s not about to go back to the way things were.

Another crackle of the headset pulls Sasuke out of his thoughts, and he blinks as he finds himself moving automatically for his weapons. “Yes?” he asks, and though he’s wary of another prank, he
knows Kotetsu and Izumo well enough to realize that they won't do such a thing again. Not with the safety of the village on the line.

“Sorry, Sasuke-kun, Ino-chan,” Kotetsu says, and beneath the evenness of his voice is the faintest hint of wary bewilderment. “I think you need to get out here.”
Practically-a-cowriter props have to go to EmeraldBenu, whose ideas and questions and general interest has given this story an actual, solid direction and a way to get there, and I am incredibly grateful.

Also, all of my current SasuNaru feels can be encompassed by this video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tjD_JhmJ7hk

Chapter Notes

First Movement: Blue Ocean Overture

[Sasuke and Ino are out the door before the chuunin even finishes his sentence, bounding up across the guardhouse roof and down the other side to halt right in front of the gate. Kotetsu and Izumo are both on their feet, solidly planted, and as the jounin approach Izumo waves a quick hand in front of him, gesturing towards one of the larger trees by the road.]

“Two visitors,” he murmurs to Sasuke, leaning in to keep from being overheard. “They claim they're from Uzushiogakure, and they want to meet with the Hokage.”

“Uzushiogakure?” Ino asks in confusion. “I haven’t heard of it.”

“Probably because it was only recently rebuilt,” a bright voice puts in from above, and Sasuke narrows his eyes, studying the tree and wondering if he should call out his Sharingan. Before he can decide, though, there's a soft rustle and with a faint, bright chime of bells, a figure drops down to land in an easy crouch.

There’s no jounin or chuunin vest, is the first thing Sasuke notices, not that that means much. A lot of shinobi simply choose not to wear them. Instead, the man—on the shorter side of average height, with a leanly muscled build and darkly tanned skin—is clad in a short, sky-blue kimono that reaches mid-thigh, worn over a pair of dove-grey leggings and a fishnet shirt. There's a kunai holster strapped to his right thigh and a weapons pouch attached to the wave-pattered obi, the edge of a sealing scroll just barely visible within it. A mask like Kakashi's, only pale grey, covers the bottom half of his face, but the eyes that Sasuke can see are new-leaf-green, and his hair is a pale and sun-streaked blond. It’s pulled up in a messy knot at the back of his head, what shoulder-length locks that manage to fall free neatly braided and left loose.

Sasuke's eyes linger on the golden tan and blond hair—a combination that’s never failed to make his heart clench just a little—but almost immediately they’re drawn to the man’s hitai-ate, tied around his bicep. It’s a symbol that’s familiar, strangely so—a tight spiral contained within a circle. Every flak jacket in Konoha bears the same mark, and to see it on a foreign shinobi’s hitai-ate is very close to eerie.

“Good morning,” the blond says cheerfully, ignoring Sasuke's silent survey. “We’re here on behalf of Yondaime Uzukage Uzumaki Arashi of Uzushiogakure, to petition for Uzushio’s right to enter the Chuunin Exams next month. If we could speak to the Hokage as soon as possible, we’d be grateful.”

Above the mask, his eyes are very, very green, and he doesn’t look away. Sasuke finds he can’t quite
bring himself to do so, either.

“We?” Ino asks, eyes narrowing as she scans their surroundings again.

The blond half-turns and waves up into the tree, and a moment later another man drops into sight. Dark-haired this time, wearing a more regular shinobi uniform in shades of grey and blue, with a dark visor over his eyes and his hair pulled up in a neat tail. “We,” the blond agrees, apparently unconcerned with the tenseness of the Konoha shinobi. Sasuke pegs him as either an idiot or a very good actor. “He’s Yuki, and you can call me Youko.”

Ino glances between them, and then raises a brow. “Youko?” she asks in faint disbelief, because she’s never, ever been one to hold her tongue and be polite when she’s not forced to. Were he not the same—if slightly more taciturn—and were ANBU not rarely required to speak, it likely would have driven Sasuke to drink by now. “Isn’t that a girl’s name?”

Youko grins, the sly-sharp twist of it just visible beneath his mask. “Among other things,” he agrees easily.

Before Ino can ask anything else, Sasuke steps forward and inclines his head, shooting her a look as he moves. She nods immediately, steps back, and disappears in a whirl of leaves, gone to inform the Hokage of their visitors. “I’m Uchiha Sasuke,” he says, finally allowing his hand to shift off his sword’s hilt. “If the Hokage is free, we will take you right to her.”

“How luxurious—door to door service,” the blond says, clearly grinning again. He drops gracefully to the ground, crossing his legs as he goes, and settles comfortably in the grass on the side of the road. “Come on, Uchiha-san, I’m sure your chuunin friends can watch the gate until your partner returns. Care to join me?”

_Idiot_, Sasuke decides with pained resignation, pushing down thoughts of another blond moron. _Yet another idiot, why is this my life?_ But he settles a careful distance from the man, because he seems willing enough to give out answers, and Sasuke is the type to take complete advantage of that.

(Besides, if the man is a Kage’s emissary, he can't be that much of an idiot. No village leader, especially from a newly formed—or reformed, as the case may be—hidden village, would take the chance of a foolish messenger saying something inappropriate and damaging relations before they can even form.)

“You said your Kage is named _Uzumaki_ Arashi?” Sasuke asks, because he’d caught the name, and while he won't allow himself to hope—

“Yes,” Youko affirms, raising an eyebrow at him, as though it’s something he should already know. “The Uzumaki originally founded Uzushio, and they’re still our largest clan. Your Shodaime married the daughter of our Shodaime, actually. Uzumaki Mito was from Uzushio.”

It’s not…disappointment that he’s feeling. Just resignation, at the fact that his search isn't over yet. And Sasuke knows, _knows_ that Naruto isn't the only one to bear that family name, but just for a second he had _wanted_.

But he wants quite often, these days, so that’s nothing new there.

Youko looks away from Sasuke, towards what little of Konoha can be seen through the gate, and Sasuke can see the turn of his smile. But he says nothing, only hums softly to himself, and Yuki remains completely still and entirely silent.

Sasuke looks at the blond, thinks of blue eyes the shade of a summer sky and golden hair several
shades darker than this man’s, and resists the urge to close his eyes and look away. He’s on duty and this is no time for weakness. There are thousands of people across the Elemental Countries with that particular combination of coloring. He has no reason at all to feel so…thwarted.

But, as ever, he wishes it were Naruto sitting across from him, and by this point, he doesn’t even try to fight it anymore.

Gaara stands on the warm stone of the docks, arms crossed over his chest as he watches two redhead children and a blond boy running on the surface of the water. They laugh and leap and twist, showing off unnecessarily as they guide a merchant ship through the reefs off the coastline, and Gaara can't quite swallow down the faint smile pulling at his lips. Aki and Natsu, both Uzumaki, and Kin Makoto, from one of the new clans to come with all the rest—and somehow, through madness or brilliance (and with Naruto it’s always rather hard to tell), they're his.

He wonders, sometimes, what would have happened had he returned to Suna, had he stayed with his brother and sister and the village that hated him. No genin, certainly. He can't imagine them trusting him with so much as a houseplant, let alone three impressionable children. No position as jounin commander, either, earned not through his demands and their fearfulness but effort and time and dedication.

No Naruto, with his bright smiles and frequent, offhand touches, the darkness in his eyes that matches Gaara's but is nevertheless always overwhelmed by so much sheer joy at life. And really, that's what truly matters in the end. Because Gaara is certain down to his bones that he would follow Naruto anywhere, into anything regardless of the odds. Follow him in and then right back out the other side, because for Naruto there is no such thing as losing.

“Sensei, sensei!” Aki stumbles onto the dock, the boys a step behind her, and staggers over to where he's standing. They're all drenched from the spray, hair drying stiff with saltwater under the morning sun, and their tans are several shades darker than when they went out. The girl gives him a grin, Uzumaki-bright, and says, “The Harbormaster says our shift is done. He's got another team coming in time to meet the next ship.”

Gaara glances across the harbor to where the man is standing on a lookout, and gets a nod and wave. He nods in return before focusing on his team again. “How many missions is that now?”

Makoto, easily the quietest and most dignified of the three, hesitates a moment before answering softly, “Nineteen D-ranks and four C-ranks, Gaara-sensei.”

“Does that mean you’ll let us enter the Exams now?” Natsu asks, sharing an eager look with his twin and all but dancing with restrained excitement.

Gaara doesn’t tell them that he put their names down the minute Naruto offhandedly suggested using the Chuunin Exams to reveal Uzushio's comeback to the world at large. Instead, he arches a brow at the three hopeful faces he’s presented with and keeps his expression perfectly straight. “Perhaps,” he allows after a moment, then checks the position of the sun. “You have two hours to change and eat, and then you will meet at Training Ground 9 for your daily exercises before finishing the day’s last mission.”

“Yes, Gaara-sensei,” they chorus, and Aki immediately grabs the boys’ hands and drags them off at a run, ignoring their complaints as they vanish into the twisting streets.

Gaara watches them go with faint amusement. When Naruto had first told him that he had put
Gaara’s name down as a potential jounin sensei, he had been...horrified. Adjustments to Shukaku’s seal or no, he was still...damaged. Different. And surely, surely no one in their right mind would inflict such a thing on one innocent child, let alone three.

But Naruto had insisted, the way he so seldom did. He’d ignored Gaara’s (completely justified) objections and entered his name into the lottery anyway, told him where to meet his new Team One when it was drawn. And because it was Naruto, because if Gaara has ever owed anything to anyone it is everything to Naruto, he had gone and met the three bright-faced and optimistic genin he’d been saddled with.

He is...satisfied with how it has turned out.

Normally, at this point in the morning he either goes to join Naruto for lunch or, if he fails to appear in a timely manner, Naruto will hunt him down, Haku usually in tow. Sometimes, Gaara will even go to lunch alone with Haku, if the Uzukage’s duties are too much for Naruto to leave. There are others as well who don’t mind his companionship—Fū and Utakata, Roushi and Kabuto, several tokubetsu jounin and a handful of jounin who respect him but don’t fear him and think of him as a friend.

It is...astonishing, to have this. To be a part of a place where no one shudders as he walks by, or turns their face away. Naruto makes it very clear to anyone wanting to live in Uzushio that those within are to be treated equally, whether civilian or shinobi or jinchuuriki.

_The past doesn’t matter here, he always says. If you’re looking for a home in this village, what you are doesn’t matter at all compared to who you are._

Gaara had been...skeptical, at first. When the first ship full of people, shinobi and farmers and craftsmen and families, had set foot on the shore, he had expected an outcry at the presence of two jinchuuriki and a handful of missing-nin, but—

It had never come. It still hasn’t, for that matter, and Gaara wonders at it even now. Haku has said that those who come are always so desperate for a home that they don’t care, that they are all displaced, outcasts in their own right, and can sympathize with those in the same situation. And after six years with very few disturbances of any sort, Gaara is almost convinced.

The sun is warm on his shoulders, and he lifts his face to the clear sky, raising a hand to shield his eyes. As ever, the smell of salt is sharp in his nose, but familiar after over half a decade in this village, and he allows himself a small smile. Here he never has to question his purpose. Here he never doubts what he was born for. He is the jounin commander and leads a genin team, stands second in authority to the Uzukage himself, and is a valued member of the shinobi forces. People smile at him, and laugh freely when he’s around, greet him and touch him and never flinch away. Perhaps a large part of that is because they never saw him before, trapped in Shukaku’s bloodlust, but it’s still something he doubts he would have ever had in Suna.

Gaara breathes out, centered and calm, and turns on his heel to head back into the village. Naruto is two days gone already, Haku with him to keep him out of trouble, and Gaara has enough duties as interim leader that this handful of hours with his genin team is an indulgence. And, indeed, a young woman in an unzipped jounin vest is striding down the street towards him, crimson hair bristling and glasses ever so slightly askew.

“Karin,” he greets over the faint stream of obscenities she’s hissing. The hem of her shirt and one of her sleeves is soaking wet, and Gaara is willing to bet a month’s pay that she’s fresh from yet another screaming match with Suigetsu.
“Gaara-san,” she returns, eyes flashing. “Do you know what that bitch Fū said? She told me Suigetsu and I fight like a married couple! A married couple! Argh! She should have been drowned at birth, that little…”

She subsides into muttered cursing again, and Gaara very carefully doesn’t let any of his amusement show on his face. Karin is very good at being passive-aggressive, underneath all of her bluster, and Gaara would rather not find himself trapped in the Uzukage’s office until midnight signing documents. Sleep is a luxury he enjoys indulging in, now that Naruto’s modifications to his seal make it impossible for Shukaku to overwhelm him.

“If we’re a married couple, it’s one on the verge of divorce!” Karin snarls, throwing her hands up in aggravation. “I hate him, Gaara-san! Ugh, that bastard!”

“I take it there are matters that need overseeing?” Gaara asks mildly, heading back up the street. Several passing shinobi give him sympathetic or amused smiles when they see the ranting redhead beside him, and he tips his head slightly in amused acknowledgment.

Karin narrows her eyes at him behind her glasses, but allows the change of subject with a sniff. “Yes, there’s a disagreement between two clans in the West District over a piece of unclaimed land they both swear is theirs by right. Ine-san from the library found the records, but we think it’s best if you deliver the verdict—less chance of bloodshed. Then there are three groups requesting entrance to the village—one is a merchant party from Wave Country, the second is a handful of shinobi wanting to join, and the third is a delegation from Hot Springs Country hoping to rework their trade agreement. I’ve set up a schedule, so follow it. No more running off to play with your genin!”

Gaara doesn’t roll his eyes, but it’s tempting. Karin is the Uzukage’s assistant, and very good at her job, but she’s…loud. And used to dealing with Naruto, who tends to get distracted by his people all too often for her tastes.

Of course, Gaara knows, it’s one of the reasons Naruto is so well-loved. People are used to thinking of the Kages as remote, untouchable figures in their heavy ceremonial robes and high towers, distant and almost god-like in their power. But Naruto is different. He walks through the streets like anyone else, laughs and smiles and greets an extraordinary number of people by name and like old friends, picks up children and teases genin and remarks on craftsmen’s wares. Often, when Gaara looks at him, he feels as though he’s looking at Uzushio given form, an entire village distilled down to its essence in one bright and brilliant man.

He pauses on the crest of a small rise, turning to look back at the ocean as it stretches away, at the city spread out around them in golden-brown and red and white, and can’t help but smile once again at the sight of it all.

Six years now, almost seven, and never once has he regretted his decision. Not even for a moment.

“From Uzushio, you said?” Tsunade sighs and rests her elbows on the desk, rubbing the bridge of her nose wearily.

In front of her, Ino nods respectfully. “Yes, Hokage-sama. Two of them, and I’d guess they’re both jounin from their chakra levels. Sasuke-kun is staying with them at the moment, but they requested they see you as soon as possible.”

Tsunade wonders if it’s a trap, a trick of some sort, though she can't imagine the purpose. “Bring them here,” she orders after a long moment. “Treat them as guests unless they prove otherwise.”
“Yes, Hokage-sama.” With a quick salute and a blurring leap, the young woman is out the window and headed back towards the gate as quickly as she can go. Tsunade stares after her for a moment, then drags her attention back to the matter at hand.

She remembers Uzushio, though she only visited it a handful of times. Most memorable, perhaps, was attending the Uzushio Jounin Exams at the Nidaime Uzukage’s invitation. Tsunade closes her eyes and thinks of walking through brightly-paved streets with her granduncle beside her and her grandmother in front of them, not even an Academy student yet and easily awed. Remembers men and women in bright robes and groups of shinobi laughing together as they laid bets. The tests had been hard, and the Uzushio shinobi had cheered loudest for one of their chuunin in particular, a young man with golden hair and a fondness for seals and powerful ninjutsu. The blond boy had won the Exam, placed first and advanced to jounin with ease and not an ounce of surprise from anyone around them, and Tsunade recalls that Mito had smiled then, small and slow and satisfied.

“That boy,” she had told Tobirama, voice low but strong, “he’s the newest hope of the Uzumaki clan, a genius with Wind and Water affinities. My niece Saehara Jin was his teacher, and she says he has an instinctive grasp of chakra techniques like she’s never seen before. Uzukage-sama is eyeing him as a possible successor.”

Tobirama’s eyes had narrowed, thoughtful and faintly unhappy, and he had murmured, “A child?”

“A brilliant one,” Mito had countered. “And he’s already fifteen. There was even talk of taking him as the next host for the Kyuubi, but for all that he’s an Uzumaki he isn’t directly related to the Uzukage’s family, or to mine.” Her eyes had darkened, but she had raised her chin. “Also, he will be too old by the time I am ready to pass this burden on. I have a few good years in me yet.”

It was then that the young man had turned, almost as if he had heard Mito’s words, and looked up into the stands where they sat. Blue eyes, Tsunade remembers. As blue as the ocean, or as blue as the sky, and so very, very determined.

_The newest hope of the Uzumaki clan_, she had thought then. _Hope._

It had suited him.

There had been other meetings afterwards, if only a few. The blond—Uzumaki Arashi, she had later learned—had been Uzukage four months when Sarutobi became Sandaime Hokage, and both men had been friends, as much as their positions allowed. As Sarutobi’s student, she had encountered the man twice on his visits to Konoha, and he had always seemed kind and gentle with a terrifying fierceness buried inside him, like a storm just waiting to be unleashed.

The God of Shinobi and the Storm God. Both third to lead their villages, both chosen young but very, very strong. Sarutobi had raged, when they received news of Uzushio’s fall, far too late to do anything. He had raged and ranted and wept when he had thought they could not see, because Uzushio was very nearly a twin of Konoha, they were so close. An unwavering ally, a village of friends when most shinobi were set at odds by politics, and it had all been lost in the space of a few days, brought to ruin because Kiri feared Uzushio’s power.

And now it’s been rebuilt, if this news is anything to go by. Rebuilt and repopulated, a shinobi village once more. One with strength, as well, to be able to send two jounin on a mission deep into another country, with no guarantee of a swift return. Jounin are, for the most part, the main source of income for their villages—B- and C-ranks might be more plentiful, but it’s the A- and S-rank missions that bring the most money.

Two jounin spared means this is either a very important mission—possible, given that it is more less
an announcement of Uzushio’s return—or considered dangerous—also possible, as whatever treaties
Konoha and Uzushio held ended when the village fell—or both.

A knock on the door draws her attention, and she calls a sharp, “Come in,” even as she rises to her
feet.

Her first glimpse of them is almost a shock, because she remembers another blond jounin, dressed
almost identically to this one. But that was more than fifty years ago, all but another world, and she
has to remind herself sharply that this is not the man she saw that day. No matter how much he looks
like him, right down to the goddamn bells in his hair. All but the eyes, which are a sharp and startling
green, very far from what she half-expects to see.

Those warm, fine-boned features are all but the same, though, regardless of her inner denials, as is
the steadiness and certainty with which this young man meets her gaze. “Hokage-sama,” he says
politely, but warmly, dipping into a respectful bow. “Greetings on behalf of Yondaime Uzukage
Uzumaki Arashi. I am Youko, and this is my partner Yuki.”

Tsunade wonders how it can possibly be coincidence, this new Uzukage bearing the same name as
his predecessor. But at the same time, how can it be anything else? She steels herself and inclines her
head in return. “Youko-san, Yuki-san, we are honored to have Uzushio shinobi visit after so long.
May I ask what the occasion is?”

That gets her a smile, the blond’s eyes crinkling over the top of his mask. “We finished
reconstruction two years ago,” he answers readily. “Our first genin teams started training then, and a
majority of them have been declared ready to take the Chuunin Exams. Uzukage-sama thought to
petition to enter them now, as Konoha is host this time and your village has long been a valuable ally
to ours.”

The Chuunin Exams are a traditionally neutral event, and it’s hardly up to Tsunade to deny a country
that wishes to enter. She nods, resettling into her seat and pulling a blank scroll closer. “I’ll make
arrangements and notify the proctors,” she agrees. “How many teams?”

“Four,” Youko answers, still smiling, but there's relief in the lines of his face, and Tsunade wonders
at it. Did they really think she would deny them? Rebuilt or not, Uzushio has always been an ally,
and they haven’t done anything to disprove that yet. Moreover, this is the first Tsunade has heard of
their return, and that they haven’t come begging for help from Konoha in their reconstruction almost
makes her more inclined to trust that this isn't some trick. Shinobi are proud to a fault, after all,
especially where their villages are concerned.

She makes a note off to the side, then nods. “Very well. Will you be returning to Uzushio with the
news?”

“I will send a message,” Yuki says unexpectedly, taking a half-step forward and inclining his head.
“Uzukage-sama will need us here for the transportation seals to work, and it would be simpler for us
to remain until the Exams begin.”

Transportation seals? Tsunade knows that Uzushio shinobi have a habit of treating such things as
commonplace, given their sealing abilities, so she tucks the question away for later. “You’re more
than welcome, of course. Ino, please take them to one of the inns and get them settled. Uchiha, I
need a word.”

“Hokage-sama,” her jounin answer, one significantly more enthusiastic than the other. Ino shoots
Sasuke a smug, if well-hidden, smile, then steps forward with a murmured, “This way, please,” and
escorts the Uzushio nin out of the room.
Tsunade lets the silence linger for a moment, watching as her favorite jounin (for torturing) starts getting tense and twitchy. Then, with her sweetest smile, she leans forward on her elbows, folds her hands under her chin, and orders, “Bring me Jiraiya.”

Sasuke flinches like she slapped him, jerking his head up to meet her gaze. He’s trying for puppy-dog eyes, likely learned from his partner who’s absolutely devastating with them, but improvements in temperament aside, he’s still a bit too much of a bastard to actually pull them off. “But—!” he protests.

Tsunade knows very well why he’s so reluctant. Jiraiya still hasn’t broken his habit of perving on the women’s bathhouses, and whenever Sasuke is around the Toad Sage has a tendency to use his eternally reluctant student as bait.

(It is, quite honestly, one of the funniest things Tsunade has seen in her long life, and after a childhood spent with Orochimaru and Jiraiya and their prank wars that’s saying something.)


The glare he shoots her isn’t so much murderous, as was likely his intention, as it is horrified, reluctantly resigned, and deeply wounded, but he goes. Tsunade snickers and leans back in her chair, wondering if it would be petty to assign a genin team to get pictures of the scuffle that’s sure to take place. She has absolute authority for a reason, though, right?
First Movement: Memories in Meter

[Meter: The pattern of a music piece’s rhythm of strong and weak beats.]

Jiraiya's had enough experience surviving the sneaky little bastard’s various attempts to give him a heart attack that he doesn’t even twitch as a dark shape drops out of the leaves and lands three inches to his left.

“Sasuke,” he says evenly, contemplating a phrase in his new manuscript before scratching it out in favor of “heaving”. That’s a good word, right? Short but descriptive, invoking lots of imagery. Yeah, that’s the right one.

“Oi, Ero-Sennin.” A pale hand snatches the manuscript right out from under his nose, and Jiraiya jerks his head up in indignation to meet sharp, narrowed black eyes. Goddamn does he ever regret revealing that nickname in a moment of drunken weakness.

“What, brat?” he demands, but it falls flat when the youngest Uchiha's gaze doesn’t even waver.

“Did you find anything?” Sasuke asks, low and fierce, and sometimes it still startles Jiraiya, the intensity of this boy in the face of his goals. Maybe it shouldn’t, as the Uchiha have always been single-minded to the point of ridiculousness, but even so, it’s unsettling.

But he softens, too, because Sasuke's entire focus is and always has been getting Naruto back, and that’s something Jiraiya can sympathize with. He’d been entirely reluctant when Tsunade informed him that Itachi had been spotted near Konoha and she was sending Sasuke with Jiraiya to keep him out of harm’s way, but a single month on the road had changed his opinion. Jiraiya had looked at him and seen Orochimaru at first, an aloof genius set at odds with his boisterous teammate, cold and angry and driven. But…

But this Team 7 isn't Jiraiya's Team 7. There's no direct and straightforward parallels he can draw between them, no carbon copies across generations. Naruto is the one gone, and Sasuke has put just as much effort into finding him as Jiraiya has.

With a sigh, Jiraiya resigns himself to the loss of his manuscript, at least for the moment, and resettles on the ground beneath the tree. “Bits and pieces,” he admits, running a hand through his tangled hair. “All of it’s fairly worrying. Akatsuki has pretty much gone to ground. We’ve got two jinchuuriki accounted for, two dispersed at best or captured at worst, and five of the most powerful ninja in the Elemental Countries just up and vanished within the space of two years. They haven’t been captured, I know that much, but there are far too many options left over in any case.”

Sasuke sinks back on his heels, eyes narrowing, and Jiraiya can see the thoughts racing across his expression, if only because he’s had two years learning to read that poker face. “Five? You confirmed the Rokubi and the Yonbi’s disappearances?” He catches Jiraiya's expression and rolls his eyes. “Hn. Utakata and Roushi’s disappearances,” he corrects.

Jiraiya thinks about calling him on it, but there's really no point. The kid knows Naruto is the Kyuubi’s jinchuuriki—such a thing was pretty much impossible to keep a secret when they were hunting Akatsuki as Akatsuki hunted the bijuu—and he also knows that the container isn't the same as the beast within. He’s just a brat who can't be bothered to use people’s names unless forced.

“I did,” he says after a beat, just to make sure Sasuke knows Jiraiya is judging him. “Iwa’s ANBU say that Roushi left his hiding spot four years ago, headed east, and met with a group of unidentified
shinobi near Taki before vanishing. Kiri is currently in the midst of dealing with their demon-lady Mizukage’s reforms, and can’t be assed to notice one of their missing-nin going even further off the grid, so Utakata was harder to pinpoint. Still, as far as I can tell, he pulled up stakes along with his apprentice about five years ago. Fū disappeared shortly after Naruto, and Gaara might have been taken along with him, they vanished so close to one another. That makes five.” Jiraiya blows out a heavy breath and shakes his head. “Five ridiculously powerful bijuu and their human containers, and not one damned idea where they are or what’s happened to them.”

Sasuke’s mouth compresses into a flat, dissatisfied line as he rocks back on his heels. “You said Roushi met a group. This is the same group of unidentified shinobi that’s been taking missions along the coast?” he asks after a moment.

Jiraiya nods, not quite able to smother the grin twitching at his lips. “You mean the one that’s giving both Kiri and Kumo a conniption fit by stealing all of their customers? Oh yeah. They’re pretty skilled from what rumors I’ve managed to hear, but for the most part people aren’t talking. Trying to find them is always a well-I-heard-it-from-a-friend-of-a-friend-of-my-sister-in-law’s-cousin kind of thing.” He shrugs slightly, eyeing the manuscript Sasuke’s still holding and wondering if he feels like risking a lunge. The brat’s good with Katon jutsus, unfortunately, and far too gleeful about using them on innocent pure-hearted romance novels. “I’d be more worried, but it’s actually a relief for Konoha. We’ve never really been able to keep up with requests, and having a new group willing to step in means we can focus on the higher-ranked missions. Win-win.”

“Unless they have something to do with Naruto’s disappearance.”

For a beat, Jiraiya thinks about reminding the Uchiha that it’s not just Naruto who’s gone missing; it’s five god-damned jinchuuriki with all the power that implies. But one look at the boy’s face and he gives it up as a bad job. Yeah, nothing’s getting through to him, not when he’s got a scent in front of his nose. It almost makes Jiraiya wonder why he didn’t contract with dogs like Kakashi. “Unless that,” he agrees. “And it’s suspicious that so many people have been moving east lately, only to vanish once they leave the coast, but I can’t track them and that’s something else no one is talking about.”

“Hn.” With a scowl, Sasuke pushes to his feet, manuscript still clutched in one bastardly thieving hand. “Tsunade wants to see you immediately. There’s a pair of shinobi here claiming to be from Uzushiogakure.”

“Uzushio, huh?” Jiraiya rises slowly, feeling his years in every bone. Tsunade has aged well—hell, even Orochimaru has aged well, but Jiraiya has never had that distinction. Of course, Tsunade and Orochimaru are both pretty, pretty princesses, so maybe that has something to do with it, too. “Well, come on. If we’re too late she’ll throw her desk at us.”

“At you, you mean.” But Sasuke shadows him as he leaps up into the tree, then across to the nearest rooftop and towards the Hokage’s office.

Jiraiya almost laughs at the boy’s naivety. “Oh, brat,” he chuckles. “If you think the wrath of Tsunade will miss you just because you’re not the target, you’re—HEY! NO, BRAT, DON’T YOU DARE!”

“Hn.” Sasuke gives him a smug smirk, flames crackling cheerfully in one hand and Jiraiya’s precious second draft clutched in the other, and then blurs forward, making for the Hokage’s window with impressive speed.

Not that it’s enough to get away from the angry Toad Sage on his ass. Jiraiya snarls, curses the day he ever listened to Tsunade and agreed to take the bastard brat traveling, and lunges.
“Care to tell me why this is the first I'm hearing of any of this, Jiraiya?” Tsunade asks, and Sasuke has sat in on enough meetings between her and Jiraiya to recognize what she’s actually saying, which is more along the lines of ‘if you don’t have a good excuse I'm going to introduce your head to the wall and damn the paperwork.’

Jiraiya also clearly understands the implications, because he raises his hands as if in surrender. “Hey, I've given you the rumors about a new shinobi village. I've even sent you the news about people migrating east in small groups and then vanishing behind a barrier I can't get around. And I know you got my reports on a new group taking missions along the coast. I just—Uzushiogakure is a bit of a leap even for me, don’t you think?”

Tsunade looks both unimpressed and unconvinced, with an edge of irritation that surprises Sasuke slightly. The Slug Sannin is generally fair almost to a fault, and this frustration is something… different. It’s not all directed at the failure of their intelligence network. And, with a sudden sound of impatience, she shoves back from her desk and stalks over to the window, every line of her body tight.

“Then tell me,” she bites out, “why a man who I could swear was fifty years dead just waltzed into my office and told me that Uzukage Uzumaki Arashi was requesting entry in the Chuunin Exams!”

Sasuke knows too little about Uzushio—practically nothing, and what he does know is what little he’s managed to gather in the last hour—for the name to mean anything to him, but Jiraiya pales slightly. “He…survived?” he asks after a moment, voice gruff with poorly hidden surprise. “I thought that the Mizukage took care of him personally.”

Tsunade sighs wearily, running a hand over her face as she turns back towards them, and for one brief moment, henge or not, she almost looks her age. “I’m not sure,” she admits, folding her arms under her breasts in a movement that’s almost defensive. “Youko said Yondaime Uzukage, so it’s possible it’s someone different. But it could also mean that he’s just counting this as a new reign—and after the disastrous way his old one ended, I wouldn’t blame him.”

There's a long moment of silence, and then Jiraiya sighs too, resigned and faintly unhappy. “Tsunade, as much as I’d like to think so, the man was almost the same age as the Sandaime. He’d be over seventy right now, and as much as I admired Sensei’s drive, I don’t think a man of his age would have been able to rebuild his village from rubble after witnessing its destruction. And I don’t think even the Storm God managed to attain immortality.”

“There’s a moment of silence, and then Jiraiya sighs too, resigned and faintly unhappy. “Tsunade, as much as I’d like to think so, the man was almost the same age as the Sandaime. He’d be over seventy right now, and as much as I admired Sensei’s drive, I don’t think a man of his age would have been able to rebuild his village from rubble after witnessing its destruction. And I don’t think even the Storm God managed to attain immortality.”

“Storm God?” Sasuke asks, unable to throttle back his curiosity in the face of an entire village showing up out of the blue. Because he’s never heard of Uzushio, has never heard of Whirlpool Country mentioned, never even heard of an Uzumaki clan when apparently one of their members is a Kage. It’s…unsettling, to think that if this has been so thoroughly missed in both daily life and an entire course at the Academy, there might be other things left out. Big things, as this seems to be.

Jiraiya glances over at him, as though he’d forgotten Sasuke's presence, and then nods. “Konoha had the God of Shinobi as Sandaime,” he explains. “Uzushio had its Storm God. From how Sarutobi-sensei used to talk about him, he was second only to Senju Tobirama with his control of water—might have matched him, even, except that he dived his power between that and wind. Youngest Uzukage, if I remember correctly—hell, he might still be the youngest Kage elected period, unless the new Kazekage’s beaten him there.”

“His name was Arashi,” Tsunade puts in, lips tilting into a faint, wistful smile. “My great-uncle took me to see his Jounin Exam in Uzushio, before I entered the Academy. Youko looks very much like
him, probably more so because there have only ever been a handful of blond Uzumaki. But as far as I know, the Sandaime Uzukage was killed when Kiri invaded. Of course, I also believed that the entire village died with him, but apparently that’s not correct.”

Sasuke looks away, feeling an aching tightness in his chest at the thought of his blond Uzumaki, who has Youko's bright, cheerful demeanor but none of his measured reserve or thoughtless, carelessly beautiful grace. Who vanished into the wind before he could hear about the homeland of his clan, hear about having a living family when he’d grown up an orphan.

“Do you think,” he asks quietly, a wild hope he can't help but give voice to, “that Uzushio has something to do with Naruto leaving?”

A large hand settles on his shoulder, squeezing briefly before dropping away. “Or being taken,” Jiraiya reminds him gently, something Sasuke himself has said over and over again for the last six years. “We don’t know, Sasuke, and even if Uzushio is newly rebuilt, it’s not a good idea to go around accusing them of stealing jinchuuriki. Especially if they’ve managed to keep knowledge of their village from everyone for so long. They must have one hell of a spymaster, honestly.”

(Somewhere very, very far away, in the middle of browbeating two ridiculously stubborn chuunin back into their hospital beds through a combination of heavy-handed emotional manipulation and light blackmail, Kabuto sneezes.)

There’s a long beat of silence, vaguely uncomfortable, and then Jiraiya sighs and steps back. “I’ll see what I can find you,” he promises. “But don’t expect too much. If the Uzukage has managed to keep all of this under wraps”—a wave of his hand encompasses the reconstruction and re-peopling of a whole hidden village—“then I’ve no doubt that the only thing getting out is exactly what he wants to get out.”

Tsunade’s huff is resigned. “Bring me everything you can,” she orders. “And on those two messengers as well. I’ve got ANBU watching them, but if we’re sheltering something that’s going to blow up in our faces, I’d like to know ahead of time. There won’t be another incident like with the Ichibi, not on my watch.”

Sasuke leaves then, barely managing a polite nod to the Hokage as he goes. There's an itch under his skin, a restlessness that he knows comes from thinking far too much of Naruto in the space of a single day, and he can't help but try to outrun it, for all the such attempts never actually work.

"Left or was taken," he thinks, crossing the rooftops in a series of quick bounds, and only managing to slow himself when he staggers into the peaceful solitude of Team 7’s old training ground. Honestly, I don't know which I want it to be. Because being taken means one thing. Leaving is another entirely.

“Fucking hell, that was nerve-wracking.” Naruto barely waits to slap a sound-and-sight barrier on the wall of their hotel room before he drags his mask down and reaches up towards his eyes.

Haku catches his wrist before he can get the contacts out, though, raising one imperious eyebrow when Naruto levels a pout at him. “Our agreement, Naruto?” he reminds the blond pointedly, even as he tugs his visor up to his forehead. “You will keep at least a portion of your disguise the entire time we are on this mission, or I will not hesitate to freeze you solid and ship you back to Gaara.”

Naruto rolls his eyes, even though he knows that it’s not so much a threat as an oath. Haku had been…reluctant, when Naruto had first proposed this trip. He’d also argued harder than anyone against Naruto coming along, even though, with his personal knowledge of Konoha’s shinobi and
the village’s layout, Naruto was the best choice.

But they’ve had this argument seven times already, three of those times on the way here, and Naruto would rather not rehash old territory that will leave him fuming and Haku giving him enough of a cold shoulder to make a glacier look warm and personable. So he leaves the contacts where they are and flops down on the bed, stretching out his senses. The seal is humming faintly, its barrier obscuring the view into the hotel room and muffling all sound, and beyond it he can feel chakra signatures flitting around the hotel’s borders. And beyond that…

Naruto closes his eyes, strangling a sigh. It’s…weird being back. When he’d first left, he’d had grand plans of returning with glory and then…well, doing something. Maybe dragging Sasuke off to see his village, or sweeping Sakura off her feet, or beating Kakashi in a spar. But then he’d rebuilt Uzushio, and something in his chest had just…settled. Eased. There’s no more desperate drive to prove himself, because he doesn’t need to. He’s a Kage now, or again, and his village is beautiful and peaceful and prosperous. Small, yes, and secretive, but there’s a reason for that last one. A reason that will hopefully be obsolete by the time the Chuunin Exams are over with.

He swallows a grimace. It had been a shock, to get to the gates and see Sasuke right there and in the flesh after close to seven years of wondering. And Sasuke looks…good. He was always a beautiful kid, but now he’s crossed the line into devastatingly and unfairly handsome, all dark hair and pale skin and sharp eyes, cheekbones to cut yourself on and carefully contained grace. He’s grown up and filled out and just…gorgeous.

*Listen to me. I sound like an old man.* Naruto chuckles softly, pressing his palms over his eyes. It’s hard, sometimes, having lived twice. When people ask him his age, it always takes concentrated effort not to answer “forty-five”, the age at which he died the first time—or worse, “sixty-four”, the sum of his ages from both lives. But the people of Uzushio and its various imports—Orochimaru’s exchange shinobi, or whatever they’re calling themselves, who followed Kabuto when the Snake Sannin made it quite clear he wasn’t about to let his assistant go blindly, because he’s not wholly the heartless bastard he pretends to be—are tolerant enough of his reincarnation and occasional descent into memories that few of them share. Maybe it’s easy enough to accept after seeing an entire village rebuilt in the space of four years.

They’ve worked so hard, all of them. Civilians and shinobi and jinchuuriki alike, all toiling to rebuild a place lost decades ago, which a majority of them have either no memory of or no tie to. And they’ve done it. Uzushio is as it was before the invasion, beautiful and shining and bright, maybe not as densely populated but a home for so many who had given up on ever finding such a thing. His home, more than Konoha ever was, and he’s so brilliantly, blindingly happy there that sometimes stops him in his tracks. Just—joy is an incredible thing, and he’s never going to take it for granted.

The bed dips slightly, and Naruto blinks up at his friend as Haku leans over him, pretty features faintly lined with worry, though there's humor in his eyes.

“If you keep giggling to yourself like that, someone’s going to think you're crazy,” Haku warns, arching a brow.

Naruto arches his right back. “Like that’s never happened before,” he scoffs. “And I wasn’t giggling, I was chuckling. It’s much manlier.”

“Of course.” Haku is better at that particular oh-look-I'm-humoring-you tone than anyone else Naruto has ever met, including Kabuto. There’s a pause, and then Haku reaches out with a soft sigh and strokes Naruto's long hair back from his face, smoothing the golden strands carefully into place. “Are you all right, Naruto?” he asks gently. “I know you were prepared to see Sasuke-kun and Tsunade-sama, but…perhaps not at once and in such quick succession.”
Naruto stares blankly up at the white ceiling for a moment before he manages to drag his gaze back down with a faint smile. “Yeah,” he answers after a beat. “I did realize what coming back here would mean, you know, but this is really the only way. We have to find proof. Once we have it, if Orochimaru comes forward like he promised to, the bastard will go away for good. I don’t want to have to spend the rest of my life looking over my shoulder, just waiting for him to manipulate things again and dump another invasion in our laps. Uzushio…she won’t be pleased.”

Haku’s answering smile is wry, and he tugs gently on a lock of hair. “I wasn’t asking about your duty, Naruto,” he chides softly. “I was asking about you. You’ve thought about Sasuke-kun quite a bit since we left. It’s only logical that meeting him again would throw you off.”

With a frustrated sound, Naruto presses his fingers over his eyes. “I’m an idiot,” he mutters. “Damn it. He probably doesn’t even care that I left. He and Sakura were always…I don’t know, closer? Their relationship was easier, at least. She did what he wanted, and he didn’t try too hard to drive her away. The two of us…I was never quite sure if he thought of us as friends or rivals. I know he was my friend, but…that doesn’t really count for a lot, in the end.”

“We’re going to be here for at least a month,” Haku points out, rising gracefully and heading for his bag to start unpacking. “Maybe you’ll be able to come to some sort of understanding in that amount of time.”

“As Naruto, maybe we could. As Youko? I doubt it.” Naruto sits up to watch his partner organize his senbon, then sighs and reaches up to pull the bell-strung ornaments from his hair, sending blond locks tumbling down around his face. They’re Mio’s, the ones she gave him that day in the market, and finding them amongst the rubble was a bittersweet and almost triumphant moment—but then, there were a lot of those, in the rebuilding. The bells are a little battered, and thin chain they’re strung on is no longer quite as bright, but the tips are as sharp as ever and the delicate carvings unmarred. He folds his fingers around them, holding them for one more moment before setting them aside and lying back again, arms crossed behind his head.

The air here smells of leaves and damp earth and heat, so different from the cool, sea-sharp air he’s become used to. To his surprise it isn’t even particularly nostalgic, and it’s that, more than anything, that twinges in his chest. Because this place was once an almost-home, and it’s where a handful of his precious people still live, but beyond that…it’s not his anymore. Uzushio is, and it has been since his first step across its border. Maybe since he first heard the city’s call, that clear night six years ago—almost seven, now.

Konoha still matters, but it’s a distant second, and that too is entirely bittersweet.
First Movement: Requiem for Bells

Chapter Notes

Because some lovely anon on FanFiction.net has been systematically going through all of my Naruto fics and flaming me for not character bashing (yes, you read that right), I decided I’ll put my thoughts on bashing in general up here for everyone to see. Please excuse the long note, but this is something I want to make clear. :)

First off: I don’t bash characters, even if I personally don’t like them. It’s just ridiculous most of the time, and generally I try to keep my fics true to character, which bashing definitely is not. If you’ve got a problem with a character, you’re probably best off shelving that while you read or simply moving on to another story. Naruto as a whole appeals to me, and because of that, I’ll give every character—no matter my personal feelings about them—a chance.

So no, Sakura isn’t going to turn into some raging, abusive harpy-bitch just because you don’t like her, and cursing me out and saying there’s something wrong with me for liking her isn’t going to do anything except make me think you’re a confrontational moron. Okay? Okay. :)

[Requiem: A dirge, hymn, or musical service for the repose of the dead.]

He dreams, as ever, of the past and present intertwined, of Konoha when there were only three faces on the mountain, one newly carved in honor of the third to wear the Hokage's hat. He dreams of walking through streets untouched by damage from Kurama, or Orochimaru's failed invasion, with his usual escort long since abandoned and the Fire Country sun hot on his face.

“Arashi!” a man calls, and Naruto turns with a grin lighting up his features at the sound of it.

“Saru!” he calls back, even as the Sandaime Hokage, missing all signs of his office beyond a Konoha hitai-ate, jogs a few steps to fall in beside him.

Hiruzen makes a face at him, heedless of his dignity—but then, he’s only been Hokage for a handful of weeks, not long enough to grow stiff yet. “I really wish you wouldn’t call me that,” he complains.

Naruto laughs and stretches his arms above his head as they enter the training grounds, twisting to pop his spine into alignment. “Ah, but if I don’t, who will?” he asks cheerfully. “If you're not careful, you might turn into one of those stuffy old men squirreled away in the office all the time. As your friend, it’s my duty to save you from such a fate.”

“How kind of you,” Hiruzen drawls, not quite managing to hide the roll of his eyes. But he doesn’t complain when Naruto takes a seat beneath an old, spreading oak tree, just joins him, leaning back against the rough bark with a sigh. The day is lazy and muggy, a thunderstorm threatening at the edges of the sky but still a ways off, and for once there are no pressing duties to attend to, nothing to demand their attention for a few hours at least.

“How kind of you,” Hiruzen drawls, not quite managing to hide the roll of his eyes. But he doesn’t complain when Naruto takes a seat beneath an old, spreading oak tree, just joins him, leaning back against the rough bark with a sigh. The day is lazy and muggy, a thunderstorm threatening at the edges of the sky but still a ways off, and for once there are no pressing duties to attend to, nothing to demand their attention for a few hours at least.

“Are you staying long this time?” Hiruzen asks at length. “Just so I know how much of an allowance for damages to write into the yearly budget, of course.”
Naruto snorts, shaking his head. The two silver bells he’s wearing, threaded onto red ribbons and securing his long hair in a loose tail, chime softly with the motion. He’s never managed to break the habit of wearing such things, not since Mio’s gift of her belled hair ornaments. Those are reserved for special occasions, or moments where he’s feeling especially sentimental, but he has others to wear now as well.

“Yui’s in charge back home, and Shunka is... ‘helping’ her,” he says with amusement, thinking of how his petite, waifish, and entirely hotheaded assistant and laid-back, lazy, forever-amused jounin sub-commander are likely butting heads at this very moment. They’ve never gotten along. Naruto likes to call it unresolved sexual tension, but that always makes Yui call him a pig and Shunka smile threateningly and finger her kunai. Ginrei, the Chief Medic, agrees with Naruto—but then, Ginrei has always been a fan of anything that ruffles Shunka’s feathers. “Honestly, if I’m gone more than a week, I think one of them will hunt me down and drag me back hogtied and screaming.”

Hiruzen laughs, because he met both kunoichi the last time Naruto was in Konoha, several months before Tobirama’s death, and therefore understands that there’s a fifty-fifty chance that Uzushio will have gone up in flames by the time Naruto gets back. Perhaps literally, even—unusually for an Uzumaki, Yui has a fire affinity.

“I wish you the best of luck, but would not take your place for all the glory in the world,” he informs his friend, shaking his head. He stretches his legs out in front of him, crossing them at the ankle, and then sighs. “Sandaime Hokage. Gods. What was Sensei thinking?”

Naruto studies him for a moment, seeing the faint lines of well-hidden grief, and has to conceal a wince. Konoha is only recently come from a war, and everyone is mourning someone. Hiruzen more than most, with the loss of his mentor as well as his comrades. He’s reached the highest position a shinobi can, but the glory is bittersweet. Uzushio is lucky—so far, both of its previous Kages retired peacefully. Konoha, on the other hand, is getting a bad track record.

But the sun is bright and the trees are green and children are laughing somewhere in the distance. Konoha is still standing, regardless of its losses, and the day is too nice to linger on grim thoughts. Decided, Naruto darts his hand forward in a blur of motion and yanks on Hiruzen’s goatee none too gently.

Sarutobi Hiruzen, Sandaime Hokage of the oldest shinobi village and one of the most powerful ninja in the Elemental Countries, squawks, flails, and almost tumbles over backwards in an attempt to get away.

Never one to waste an advantage, Naruto takes the opportunity to get safely out of range. Only then does he allow himself to shake with laughter at the sight of his friend. “You mean Tobirama? He was thinking that with that old man beard, you already looked the part, of course,” he taunts between fits of giggles at the other man’s expression.

“You brat,” Hiruzen hisses, even as he rises to his feet with a growl and throws himself forward. Naruto ducks away, but he’s laughing too hard to make a good show if it, and the Hokage catches him around the waist in a lunge and bears them both to the ground. They wrestle for a moment, attempting to grind each other’s faces into the grass, before Hiruzen takes advantage of proximity and snags the bells from Naruto’s hair. Naruto splutters as the locks come tumbling down into his eyes and mouth, and Hiruzen crows his triumph as the Uzukage falters, squirming out of the blond’s grasp like an eel and retreating a few feet to brandish his prize.

“These are mine now,” he tells Naruto smugly, tucking them away in his kunai pouch with an entirely unnecessary flourish. “Consider it fit payment for your assault on the Hokage’s person.”
Naruto sticks his tongue out at him, even as he climbs to his feet. With a huff, he winds his fingers in his hair and drags it out of his face, grimacing at the leaves and twigs now littering it. “Bastard,” he mutters halfheartedly. “What are you going to do with bells? Pretty as you are, Hiruzen, I don’t think they’re quite your color.”

“Lies,” Hiruzen parries cheerfully, though he gives in and passes Naruto a pair of senbon to use instead. “Red is most certainly my color. And I’m not sure yet. Maybe I’ll make a teamwork exercise out of them, and use it on my genin team when I get one.”

“Bells?” Naruto repeats skeptically, twisting his hair into a sloppy bun and sliding the slender needles through to secure it. “What the hell kind of teamwork exercise can you do with bells?”

“Never underestimate the sadistic imagination of a jounin sensei.” Hiruzen grins at him, then turns in the direction of the village. “Come on,” he calls over his shoulder. “A new ramen stand just opened near the Administration Building, and I’ve been wanting to try it. Your treat, right?”

Rolling his eyes, Naruto follows. “My treat? Hiruzen, if you think that you can get out of paying every time just because I missed your appointment ceremony—”

“It was a very important day for me,” Hiruzen says solemnly, though his dark eyes are dancing. “Life-altering. And it truly broke my heart to see that one of my best friends didn’t even bother to put in an appearance. Shattered it all into pieces, really, so take responsibility for your actions, Arashi.”

“Does Konoha know they have a great big moocher as Hokage?” Naruto retorts, but he doesn’t resist as Hiruzen steers them towards the ramen stand. “It could spell absolute disaster for your economy, and then Uzushio would be left to pick up the pieces after Konoha’s destruction by its enormous moocher of a leader.”

“This coming from the man who leaves mortal enemies in charge of his village while he’s away? And not just mortal enemies, but a ridiculously strong Katon user with a hair-trigger temper and an assassin so skilled at silent killing that she gives Kiri Hunter-nin nightmares?”

“I wouldn’t go so far as to call them mortal enemies—”

“Oh, really? Then what would you call them?”

“…Um. Rivals?”

“Rivals generally doesn’t include wanting to rip each other’s throats out barehanded. And I know Yui-san threatened to do that last time you left her alone with Ookami-san.”

“Oh, shut up, Saru.”

(Jiraiya goes to his old teacher, the first time he’s assigned a genin team of his own, and asks if Sarutobi would be alright with him using the bell test his own team had been given that first day.

Sarutobi just looks at him for a long moment, seated behind his desk with his pipe in one hand, and then he very, very carefully reaches into his robes and withdraws a pair of silver bells strung on crimson ribbons. He weighs them in his hand for a moment, and then asks, “Do you remember meeting Uzumaki Arashi, Jiraiya?”

Jiraiya blinks at the unexpected question, rocking back on his heels and chewing on a corner of his lip. “I…do,” he affirms after a moment, because it’s hard to forget a man like Arashi, forever smiling
and laughing and still unspeakably deadly, a friendly summer sea just barely concealing the furious tempest beyond the horizon. Jiraiya had seen the aftermath of the attack on Uzushio, and despite the ruined city, what had caught his attention first was the graveyard of Kiri ships off the coast, torn apart by wind and water wielded by a man who more than lived up to his title.

He also remembers meeting their teacher at the training grounds one bright and sunny morning—long after they all became jounin, and a handful of weeks after Mito's death left Uzumaki Kushina the Kyuubi jinchuuriki—only to find absolute destruction, rubble and craters and fire, and Sarutobi in the midst of it all, expression flat and eyes burning. Tsunade had asked what was wrong, but he’d said nothing, and it was only later that they found out Uzushio had been leveled almost two weeks past, before they could even call for help.

Sarutobi sighs, then, drawing Jiraiya's gaze again, and reaches out. Carefully, with a faint sense of ceremony, he takes Jiraiya's wrist, tips the bells into his broad palm, and gently closes his fingers over them.

"Those were his," he says softly, withdrawing three paces to stand by the window, his face backlit by the sunlight and entirely unreadable. "He let me have them after I stole them in a spar, and I used them for the bell test in honor of his loyalty to his friends and his dedication to the people of his village. You are welcome to them, Jiraiya, but…if you pass them on, would you remember?"

Throat thick, Jiraiya simply nods, carefully transferring the bells to his own pouch and then bowing to his teacher. “I won't forget,” he promises, and he doesn’t.

Minato hears the story, when he gets his genin team.

Kakashi hears it, too, though it means less to him by then, Uzushio faded to a collective memory that’s rarely discussed. But he hears it, remembers, and Sarutobi watches it all, and thinks of laughter in the sunlight and the bright, sweet chime of bells.)

They’ve times their arrival in Konoha just right—there's no moon, and clouds cover vast swathes of stars, leaving the village dark and eerie, the shadows drowning-deep and all but unbroken. Naruto moves quick and silent through them, not needing to look to know that Haku is flanking him.

Here and there, scattered across the village in one and twos and small, tight clusters, are chakra signatures—not of people, but of seals. Tiny bits of darkness, shards no one but a fuinjutsu master familiar with the organization would think to track, but Naruto can feel them all like pins against his skin. Each and every one of the sorry bastards.

He comes to a halt at the edge of a boundary fence, tall and imposing and far more dangerous than it appears at first glance, and feels more than sees Haku slide up into the branches of the oak at the corner. A pause, and Naruto counts his heartbeats to control his impatience—he's gotten better at these kinds of missions, remembers enough about being Arashi and from his own genin days to contain himself, but it’s still not him. Not natural or desired in any sort of way. But there are only a few seconds before frost forms on the ground in front of him, shaping itself into four parallel lines.

Four guards, then. All Root ANBU, but that’s to be expected. Naruto gives the signal to go and bounds over the fence in a flash that’s almost too quick to be seen, then drops into the beautifully arranged garden on the other side and crouches in the bushes there, sense straining for any movement. But there's none, only a faint whispering breeze he can tell is natural, and he lets out a slow, silent breath in relief.
One obstacle down. Only about a hundred more to go.

God, Danzo is such a paranoid bastard.

Though, granted, considering the number of people who would happily slit his throat—and not just among Konoha's enemies—perhaps it's justified.

Another thirty seconds of silence, just to make sure they haven't been spotted, and then Haku joins him in a flicker of speed and shadows. His visor is gone, as is Naruto's mask—both are distinctive, easily identifiable, and if they're caught here and doing this they're going to have a lot more to worry about than just having their faces bare.

A guard passes, going left, and a moment later one in the opposite direction. Naruto feels their seals disappear into the distance and then raises a hand, fingers twisting as he signs, take a clockwise run, seals every ten meters, three minute window to meet up.

Haku nods in understanding, already pulling a stack of paper squares from his weapons pouch as he slips away. Naruto doesn't let himself watch his friend go—he's a Kage, Haku is a skilled jounin and regularly plays his bodyguard, and they're both more than capable of looking out for each themselves. Instead, he pulls out his own sealing papers and lays one against the wall, right where it joins the ground, and it settles into place with barely a flicker of chakra. As long as he waits for the guards to pass him before he sets them, they should go unnoticed.

The seals are glorified recording devices, honestly, though it took Naruto weeks to tweak them enough to work for something like this. This is Danzo's stronghold, his lair, but when he and Haku are done ringing it with seals designed to record and remember chakra signatures, present wards, and guard rotations, they'll have a way in.

Of course, there's a chance that Danzo hides all of his information and records somewhere else, but Naruto doesn't think that's likely. After all, the man is suspicious and obsessed, and he probably won't want to risk anyone else running across his files should they stumble on some other hideout. Here in his house he likely feels safe.

Naruto won't let him hold on to that safety for long. Not after what he did. Not after what he'll do in the future if he's not stopped now.

He slaps his last seal into place just as Haku slides empty-handed through the bushes, entirely unharmed. The brunet nods to signal that everything's well, then leaps the wall in a blur. There's no outcry, no sudden alarm, so Naruto follows him, touching down lightly in the streets.

He's…angry, and it's not a familiar sensation. Not anymore, at least, because regardless of the destruction that Uzushio faced it's better now, repaired and rebuilt and as strong as ever, but—

But that likely won't last long, if Danzo has his way.

Uzumaki Reisi was a good, kind child, Naruto knows, forever soft-spoken and easygoing in direct contrast to his hotheaded aunt. That last glimpse of him—horrified, haunted, angry—has troubled Naruto since he first saw it. The boy was a chuunin, but an elite one, and particularly clever. He'd gone to Konoha some months before the invasion, studying the Katon techniques that few in Whirlpool Country could teach him, and when he had come back it seemed nothing had changed. But clearly something had, and combining knowledge of that with Orochimaru and Kabuto's tales of Root and Danzo's machinations during the Third Shinobi War, the picture becomes unhappily clear.

Naruto has no body to check for a seal, no way to tell if he's correct in his suspicions, but he'll raid
Danzo's files to find out and not feel an ounce of shame in doing so. For Reisi, for Yui, for all of Uzushio and what Danzo likely wrought, he'll do it.

For them, he won't let anyone or anything stop him.

Sakura finds Sasuke in the bar just after midnight, the way she always seems to when his late-night drinking stretches to lengths she considers excessive. It's rarely the same bar, and never the same one twice in a row, since Sasuke has no attachment to the places beyond a desire for darkness, solitude, and lots of high-proof alcohol, which in a shinobi bar tends to be the standard. But regardless, as soon as twelve o'clock passes, if he isn't headed back to his apartment, she inevitably slides onto the stool beside him a few minutes later.

If he were a more suspicious person, he might think it was a conspiracy.

“Long day?” she asks him now, signaling for the bartender to bring her one of what Sasuke's having. Sasuke tosses back the last of his and thinks vaguely that she’s going to regret it, Tsunade-trained tolerance or not. He’ll drink for the taste, certainly, but not at times like this. Not when all day has been filled fit to bursting with thoughts of their lost teammate. He knows better than to try and drink away his memories, knows from experience that alcohol never drowns out blue eyes or an achingly familiar voice, but it...helps. It blunts the sharp, cutting edges of his thoughts, and gives him enough peace to sleep. Even times like now, when he’s learned that Naruto still has family out there, and what if he went to them? What if he left Konoha because there was nothing here for him

(because Sasuke wasn’t enough)

and went to live with this other Uzumaki who’s a Kage and rebuilt his village and a relative which is something Sasuke will never be—

“Hey!” A fist impacts the top of his head—gently, for Sakura, which likely means she’s actually worried about him. Sasuke doesn’t quite yelp, but it’s a near thing. He pulls back, wrenches around, and glares at the kunoichi, who raises an unimpressed eyebrow in return.

“Long day?” she repeats. “Because I could have sworn that you and Ino were commiserating about having gate guard duty last night, and as far as I’m aware there were no major invasions today. So why are you attempting to pickle yourself, Sasuke?”

Sasuke gives her a moody look and steals the glass as the bartender attempts to pass it to her. He downs it in one go, then orders, “Just bring the bottle,” and waves the man away. It’s a stall, though, and from the way Sakura is watching him she knows it.

He’s never been good with words—“painfully awful” is closer to the truth, really—so he doesn’t try to sugarcoat anything as he rubs his hands over his face and asks, “Have you ever heard of Uzushiogakure?”

“Yes,” Sakura answers promptly, which is...to be expected, likely. Sasuke considers himself fairly book-smart, but he’s never been as voracious a learner as Sakura, who likes knowing things just for the sheer joy of knowing them. “A former shinobi village in Whirlpool Country, traditionally allies with Konoha, which was destroyed by Kiri during the Third Shinobi World War. Konoha flak jackets all bear Uzushio's spiral mark as a sign of the long-standing friendship between the villages.”

“Rebuilt, now,” Sasuke tells her, mouth tightening as he remembers the pair at the gates. “Two of their emissaries arrived today. And one of them said that their Kage is an Uzumaki.”
Sakura gets it in the space of a heartbeat, and as the bartender sets their sake down, she snags it, pops the cork, and takes a long swallow directly from the bottle. The implications are clear enough, really. They’ve been looking for any sign of Naruto for years, Sakura as well in the beginning though she’s mostly given up hope now. And in seven years, they’ve never found so much as a hint, not a word with any sort of dependability behind it.

Family is family, and if the reason they haven’t found anything is the same as the reason no one has heard of Uzushio’s reconstruction—seals and barriers and a good spymaster, Jiraiya had said—then maybe, maybe—

Maybe there's finally a chance.
First Movement: Hope in Harmony

Chapter Notes

So my twin brother (*cough* enabler) and I currently have a bit of a bet going as to who can come up with the crackiest Naruto pairing, and I thought I’d invite others to join in the fun! We’re excluding Naruto himself, as it seems he has at least one pairing story with pretty much every character imaginable, and have agreed to stick to slash or femslash stories, but otherwise it’s all fair game! Winner (to be judged by my brother and myself) gets a story for their crack pairing and the infamy of coming up with it, so if you’d like to throw an idea out there, feel free. We welcome them. We’re judging “crackiest” on the grounds of weirdest-in-regards-to-their-canon-relationship, if that helps. ;)

[Harmony: Pleasing combination of two or three notes played together in the background while a melody is being played; also refers to the study of chord progressions.]

“There’s a Kiri ship circling the island,” Utakata says, his voice suspiciously mild, hands neatly tucked away inside the sleeves of his kimono. “It appears they’re trying to find a way around the barrier.”

Gaara glances up from the stacks of paperwork foresting his desk and silently raises one brow. He knows as well as anyone that Utakata has no love for his former village, and even less for anyone considering attacking his new one. In the face of his charming and carefree manner it’s easy to forget just what he is, what he can be. But Saiken is a formidable opponent, and Utakata has always had a close connection with him, even since before Killer Bee taught Uzushio's jinchuuriki how to communicate with their bijuu.

“You’re certain?” he asks after a moment, because they’re all a little tense with their Kage gone, and Gaara doesn’t want Naruto to come back and laugh at them for jumping at shadows. Though, of course, he also doesn’t want to dismiss something important and have Naruto return to a burned-out husk, either.

Utakata nods, solemn and thoughtful. “I am. They hide it well—had I not taken a second look, I might have dismissed it as a simple fishing boat. But I trained on such a craft, and I know the signs. There are shinobi aboard, and if they’re not the majority of the crew at the very least, I’ll eat my pipe.”

This is…not an ideal situation. Gaara glowers down at the surface of the desk, pondering what to do. They could sink the ship, of course—even Gaara's genin would be capable of such a feat, given Naruto's training guidelines—but that would be the first step towards war. And Uzushio, for all its strength, is not ready for a war. Not with Danzo still a threat.

“We will have to do something,” Utakata reminds him, almost gently. “There are still shinobi who remember the last time Kiri was at our borders, and what came of it. Even if the sum of your actions is sending a messenger hawk to notify Uzukage-sama, it will keep them happy. Perhaps not as happy as tearing a Kiri ship to pieces would, but enough.”

Gaara remembers the destruction he first saw, when he and Naruto and Haku arrived at the edge of a
city’s corpse. He remembers the bones that they piled up, hundreds of lives lost and practically forgotten in the scheme of the world. Remembers the tears of an old man, his white hair just touched with red, when he had set foot on the docks and seen the city rising proud and stately before him once again.

In the face of that, Gaara thinks that he too would be quite happy tearing a Kiri ship to pieces.

“I will send a hawk to Naruto,” he agrees at length, looking back up to meet Utakata’s steady amber gaze. “Fū and Roushi are still within the village?”

The sub-commander nods. “Roushi just returned from a meeting with the Daimyo, and Fū is currently drilling her genin team. Should I call them?”

“No, but put them on alert and have them ready if an attack does come,” Gaara orders, rising to his feet. “I will notify the jounin forces and have Karin check the barrier. Short of declaring war, that is all we can do for now.”

He turns away as Utakata bows and retreats, lets his attention fall on the wide window overlooking the village, all the way down to the azure sea. There are people, civilians and shinobi alike, moving down there, and Gaara wonders whether it’s paranoia to think that they look just a little more wary than they did on his walk here.

“Come home quickly, Naruto,” he murmurs to the empty office that all but radiates its normal occupant’s force of will. Comforting, in such times, but not enough. Not nearly. Uzushio is Naruto’s village, through and through. “You are needed here.”

The first thing that registers is dull throb behind his temples. Then it’s his parched throat, the foul taste in his mouth, and the feel of a familiar and sharp-edged chakra looming over him.

“Geez,” an equally familiar voice huffs. “So this is what Konoha’s elite get up to on a Thursday night? I don’t know whether to be disapproving of your life choices or disappointed that you didn’t invite me.”

“Ino, you cruel, evil harpy-bitch,” Sakura groans. “Ow. And it was an impromptu war council and brainstorming session. What were you going to contribute exactly?”

“I’m going to chop you into pieces,” Ino says cheerfully, settling cross-legged on the floor beside the couch Sasuke and Sakura had managed to drag themselves to last night. “Slowly. Painfully. Lee will be heartbroken, I’m sure.”

Sasuke manages to peel one eyelid back despite his body’s strident protests. When nothing implodes or catches on fire, he tries the other one and is vaguely pleased with the results. The ache in his head is manageable, as is state of his stomach. He’s always been fairly resilient, and traveling with Jiraiya required a strong dose of liquid courage enough times that his tolerance is at least respectable.

“We think Naruto went to Uzushio,” he says once he’s semi-upright enough to fake coherency. “Maybe one of his family met him and told him they were rebuilding the village, or they just took him away, but since he’s dropped off the map it’s the best bet we have.”

Ino grins at him, bright and wicked and looking far, far too awake for this hour of the morning. She’s also perfectly dressed in her clean, unwrinkled uniform, and even her hair looks perky. Sasuke vaguely sort of hates her for it, since he feels like he got run over by a small herd of wildebeests sometime last night. “Aww, what a letdown. I wanted to see him dressed as a dancing girl,” she
complains, but then sobers slightly. “Let me guess, you’re going to stage a kidnapping and pump the
cute blond one for answers?”

Sasuke grunts. They’d considered it, about two bottles in. But… “Tsunade would eat my face,” he
says, and pretends that it doesn’t sound glum. “She’s touchy about the Uzushio thing.”

“My too,” Sakura chimes in, clearly disappointed as she levers herself up on one elbow, looking
mostly unaffected by the night. Apparently having a sake-loving lush for a master is good for
something. “Even if they do have information on Naruto, he’s officially only a genin-level missing-
nin, and causing a diplomatic incident with a newly reestablished shinobi village—and one of
Konoha’s traditional allies—over him will probably make her head explode from all the political
repercussions.”

That is, in a nutshell, exactly why Sasuke sympathizes with Jiraiya’s determination to never become
Hokage. Tsunade is good at it. Sasuke just would not give a shit, no matter the consequences. He’s
bad at that kind of thing, and always has been.

“Polite interrogation, then?” Ino asks. “Or, well, whatever Sasuke-kun’s version of it is.”

Sasuke suspects he should be offended by that, but his desire for coffee overrides it and he pushes
himself off the couch, untangling his legs from Sakura’s and sparing a moment to be deeply, deeply
grateful that it wasn’t Lee who walked in on them. He can only stand so many challenges in the
name of Sakura’s honor, after all, and he’s already reached his monthly quota.

“Sasuke, coffee,” Sakura orders, then flicks a glance at Ino, who grins and nods. “Two of them. And
then get out, find the Uzushio nin, and get us some answers.”

“This is my house!” Sasuke protests, even though he’s already heading for the kitchen. “You can’t
kick me out!” The only response is twin giggles and he rolls his eyes, stalking over to add water to
the coffee pot. He remembers Naruto taking Sakura’s hits, untrained as they were, and then brushing
them off when they were kids, and is a little amazed by it. He’d much rather suffer through her
orders and just get it over with than risk her punching him through another wall.

“I should have run away with Naruto,” he grumbles, watching the pot fill with coffee, the scent alone
returning life to his limbs. “If I had known that staying meant becoming your trained monkey—”

“Stop complaining,” Ino advises, wandering in and laying out three mugs. Sasuke narrows his eyes
at her; despite appearances and her and Sakura’s apparent misconceptions, this is his house, damn it.
“You know you love us both to pieces and your life would be a barren, wasted thing without us.”

Sasuke knows no such thing, and gives her a glare that he hopes indicates this, folding his arms over
his chest. He’s entirely aware that he cuts an impressive figure, one that fully intimidates ANBU
trainees and sends them cowering over to the less intimidating Ino with their questions. Of course,
after that they quickly learn that there’s a reason Ino wears a tiger mask, and it isn’t because of some
overinflated sense of self-worth.

Ino ignores him, as she always does and always has, and cheerfully orders, “Sugar, Sasuke-kun,”
with a bright grin.

Sasuke doesn’t even hesitate to pass over the bowl of salt, baring his teeth right back.

Sakura, just sidling into the kitchen, catches Ino’s hand half a second before the blonde doctors her
cup, tips the salt back into the bowl, and retrieves the sugar from the top shelf. She shoots her genin
teammate a dry look and tells Ino, “Sasuke doesn’t like sweet things, so he never keeps them on
hand. If it’s in reach, it’s not sugar.”

That earns Sasuke a raised brow from the blonde as well, but Ino simply murmurs, “Noted,” and wanders away with her mug. Sasuke can hear her flop down on the couch, and winces, imagining brown stains everywhere.

“Be nice, Sasuke,” Sakura warns, taking her own mug and adding milk until it’s a pale beige. Sasuke winces at that, too. Adding anything at all to black coffee seems like sacrilege. She takes a long sip, humming in satisfaction, just to be petty, then lowers the cup with a sigh and says, “You’re going to talk to them today?”

Sasuke doesn’t have to ask who she’s talking about. “Of course. If Naruto is in Uzushio, he’ll be memorable. They’ll know him.” Of that, at least, Sasuke has no doubt. No one can just forget Uzumaki Naruto. Not even when they try. Sasuke knows that from experience, not that he tried very hard or for very long. It was just…frustration. Hopelessness.

But this is a hope. This is a chance.

He bolts his coffee back, barely registering the heat of it, and then heads to his bedroom to change clothes. Even if he’s never been one for social niceties, appearing in front of two men who know Naruto—who might carry word back to him—in clothes that smell like the floor of a bar with yesterday’s five o’clock shadow taking over his face is not acceptable. Moreover, it’s something Jiraiya might do, and Sasuke would fling himself off a cliff just to be contrary if Jiraiya told him not to.

“Don’t destroy my house,” he growls at the two women sprawled out in his living room as he stalks past. Ino just toasts him with her mug, while Sakura rolls her eyes and makes a face at him.

“Live a little, Sasuke,” she retorts. “What’s a couch without a few coffee stains?”

“Mine,” Sasuke instantly counters. “I will trap you in a nightmare where Shikamaru is your husband if you spill so much as a drop. And Ino, I’ll make yours being married to Lee.”

That gets him twin cries of protest and offense, but Sasuke is already out the door and gone.

It’s easy enough to find the inn where the two Uzushio nin are staying—it’s the only one in Konoha with an ANBU contingent camped out around it. Sasuke pauses on the edge of a rooftop, covertly studying the guard. He recognizes the squad, and knows who will doubtless be in command, so he gives a surreptitious signal and then drops into a narrow alley between a seamstress’s shop and a liquor store.

Five seconds later, another shape follows him down, familiar despite the sparrow mask he’s wearing. Neji lands lightly, barely stirring the dust beneath his sandals, and nods. “Uchiha.”

“Hyuuga,” Sasuke returns, though he feels some of the tension in his shoulders easing. Neji is…not a friend, exactly, but an ally. They’ve both been looking for Naruto, both aware of the aching hole of his presence and the value of him even if few others will see it, and even if Neji isn’t quite as fervent about looking as Sasuke, well—few people are.

They’re both geniuses, both utter morons. And it took Naruto to make them realize it.

“The visitors?” Sasuke asks, folding his arms over his chest and leaning back against the wall.
Neji huffs, sounding faintly offended. “They raised some sort of barrier at first,” he says darkly, “one that the Byakugan could not get past. It blocked both sight and hearing within the room for the first hour, but since then the sight component has come down. We’ve been on duty since yesterday afternoon, and nothing beyond that has occurred.” He looks Sasuke over for a moment, and then adds quietly, “They keep mentioning their kage. An Uzumaki.”

Sasuke nods, but doesn’t go into detail; Neji is more than capable of reading in between the lines, and he knows Naruto has been Sasuke's first priority for almost a decade now. “I'm going to talk to them,” he says, practically daring Neji to stop him, and moves in a blur, leaping up to the roof and over to land on the balcony next to the room Ino checked the foreign nin into.

To his surprise, the dark-haired one—Yuki—is perched on the windowsill, cleaning his senbon with his hair down but his visor in place. As Sasuke straightens, he sets the polishing cloth aside and glances up, then cuts Sasuke off before he can even open his mouth.

“You'll want to direct any questions you have towards Youko,” he offers, a faintly wry smile tipping the edges of his mouth. “He is the one with the position and authorization to answer them. I’m just here to see that he doesn’t kill himself doing something noble and foolish.”

Sasuke snorts. “Is that likely?” But then he remembers Youko's easy, cheerful trust at the gate, and tacks on, “Never mind. Is he here?”

Yuki shakes his head and points south with one of his senbon. “He went to explore the market earlier. Since I assumed there was little trouble he could find with an entire ANBU guard platoon in tow, I elected to remain here. He should be simple to find—just listen for laughter.”

Barely swallowing a huff of his own amusement at the image, Sasuke nods his thanks and leaps up to the rooftop again, inclining his head to Neji and then heading for the market with swift steps.

It’s not quite as easy to find Youko as Yuki made it out to be, of course. The market is large and busy and hectic, but Sasuke was a good memory for chakra, and Youko's had felt like sea air on his face yesterday, easy enough to pinpoint against the fire-heat and earth-warmth of Konoha’s population. He wonders, as he scans the crowds, if Youko is an Uzumaki, since he didn't give a clan name, but in the end it doesn’t really matter. Either way he should have the information Sasuke needs.

A moment of looking and he finally latches on to that whisper of chakra, cool and light, almost the way Naruto's was but fainter, not quite as deep. Smaller reserves, Sasuke supposes, or Youko is better at hiding his chakra. The blond is perched on a rooftop to Sasuke's left, watching the people below with an easy sort of humor. He looks up as Sasuke approaches, politely keeping his speed down so as not to startle the Uzushio nin, and offers a smile just barely visible beneath his mask.

“Uchiha-san,” he greets cheerfully, leaning back on his hands. “Beautiful day, isn’t it?”

Sasuke nods, just barely containing himself from battering the blond with questions, and slowly takes a seat beside him. He wonders how best to approach the subject, and then decides that since his tact is pretty much nonexistent anyways, he might as well just dive in headfirst like he always does.

“Youzamki Naruto,” he says, and hopes his voice isn’t as desperate as he feels. “Do you know him?”

Youko doesn’t stiffen. All of his muscles stay loose and his posture remains easy, but Sasuke is watching and can see the way the lines around his eyes deepen, the green darkening ever so slightly. A reaction, which means he’s at least heard of Naruto.
“There are a lot of Uzumaki in Whirlpool,” is all the man says, though, his tone light and breezy. “May I ask why you want to know, Uchiha-san?”

That’s a non-answer if Sasuke has ever heard one, and he can feel his heartbeat pick up slightly in his chest. *Yes.*

“Naruto was my genin teammate,” he says evenly, not letting his sudden euphoria show. “He vanished seven years ago, and I’ve been looking for him ever since. You said that Uzushio is the home of the Uzumaki clan, so I thought…”

He trails off into silence, and Youko doesn’t pick up the thread. He simply stares out over the market, expression hidden as he turns his face away, but Sasuke has learned patience over the years and waits him out.

For Naruto, for even the vaguest hint, he could wait a decade.

“Uzushio’s population scattered, after the invasion,” Youko says at length, shaking his head. The bells strung on his hair-sticks chime brightly, a mockery of lightness against the tone of the conversation. “Uzukage-sama called them back to rebuild. There are…missing-nin among us. Missing-nin and deserters and shinobi who never had a place to call their own. It’s a village of outcasts and castaways, and all of us come from somewhere else, or by way of somewhere else. You can…understand why I might hesitate to give away information on a possible Uzushio shinobi.”

Sasuke understands, but that in no way means he has to like it, or even accept it. He grits his teeth as the words resound in his head—*a village of outcasts and castaways,* and if anything has ever described what Naruto was to Konoha that’s it. Proof enough, likely, that Naruto is in this new village, among others like himself—

The pieces connect.

*The jinchuuriki,* he wants to say, remembering Jiraiya’s information on Utakata, on Roushi, on Fū, remembering Gaara and his lonely sort of fury. Missing-nin or outcasts or both, all of them, and surely, surely Uzushio would not be this defensive if they had nothing to protect, nothing to hide.

When Sasuke blinks away the sudden rush of thoughts and looks over, he’s met by solemn green eyes framed by tumbled locks of sun-bleached blond hair, an expression with gravity and determination and fierce, ferocious protectiveness all wound together.

Youko isn’t going to tell him anything more, and there’s a warning in his eyes for Sasuke to keep what he *has* said to himself. It’s a show of trust when none was asked for, an offering that says, more than anything, that Sasuke’s hope is not misplaced. Because Uzushio is a village for the lost and the displaced, the wanderers and the dispossessed, populated with jinchuuriki and Uzumaki and shinobi with nowhere else to go, and surely Naruto is among them.

Sasuke closes his eyes, and the feeling in his chest is too bittersweet to be a victory, too sharp and hot and aching for any sort of triumph, but it’s something.

After nearly a decade of nothing at all, something is in itself a victory.
Their first real meeting face to face—not glowing eyes in the darkness, not ominous voices and shadowy figures and the dim-dark of a sewer around them—comes three months after the first group of returning refugees staggers into Uzushio.

There are people in the village now, many of them, and Naruto walks among them and knows them. He remembers them. A girl who once sold flowers by the fountain before the Administrative Center, now with more white than brown in her hair. An old man, hardly able to walk unaided but sharp of mind and tongue, who once worked the Mission Assignment desk, and who looks at Arashi—Naruto, he’s Naruto now in this life, more or less—with almost desperate eyes. A little boy he once carried on his shoulders, grown with children of his own. A woman, bent with age, who was once a child hiding behind her parents’ robes at his inauguration.

And they know him, have known him since they first set foot in Uzushio once more, and Naruto will never forget it, an old man with once-blue hair gone snowy white with time, a Suoh who taught him how to throw a senbon as a child, picking his slow and careful way down the ramp of the ship to the newly rebuilt dock. He’d paused then—Suoh Tomi, who always had a gruff word of advice, a moment to spare for answering even the smallest of questions—with both feet on solid ground, and Naruto had stepped forward, his heart in his throat.

“I saw you,” Tomi had said, voice creaking with age but gaze unwavering, leaning against a pillar as though it was the only thing keeping him on his feet. There had been pain in his eyes, pain and hope and the aching, tearing desire to believe. “I would swear before the gods themselves that I saw you fall, Arashi-kun.”

Naruto had taken another step then, and another, and another, until he was close enough to curl a hand—strong, young, too young for the ache in his chest, the grief in his heart—around a shoulder unbent by age.

“Not forever,” he’d murmured back, meeting the man’s eyes. “Didn’t you always say it? Uzushio will never fall, not when even one soul remains to hold her.”

And Tomi had smiled, like a stalwart stone untouched by time. He’d clapped Naruto on the shoulder in return and answered, “We did, and a soul like yours is a fierce thing indeed, Uzukage-sama.”

(No cheer from the ship behind them, no surge of voices, but…a whisper. A brief and mighty stirring just below the surface, like the retreat of waters before a tsunami.

Home, the people had murmured to one another. **Uzushio. Uzukage. Home.**)

So there are people, old and new, and when Naruto walks among them they whisper Arashi-sama and Yondaime and smile at him with their hearts in their eyes. And it’s…good, because Uzushio is reforming around him, rising from the rubble with the help of many hands, and it eases the ache in his chest that’s existed for as long as he can remember.

But he’s not just Arashi. He’s had another life to shape him as well, and he only has to look at Gaara—resolute, steadfast, his right hand as Haku is his left—to remember that. Only has to channel chakra and see the spiral seal, so simple but so complex, flare to life to remember just what it is that
sets him apart now. Not his standing as the village’s genius orphan, the next greatest Uzumaki, not the unwavering support of an entire city, but the Kyuubi.

A demon.

*Demon brat*, they whispered sometimes, in Konoha. No one was ever outright abusive, never laid a hand on him, but somehow that was…worse. Worse because the whispers never stopped, and a blow might have.

Naruto understands what he is. He remembers Mito and the handful of others, nine sacrifices for nine bijuu, and their strength both of chakra and of heart. And he looks at himself, at Gaara, and wonders just what it was that went wrong. Gaara’s seal is unstable, the Ichibi riding too close to the surface, and Naruto’s cost Konoha’s Yondaime his life, but those are things well beyond their control. To be hated for that—it’s like being hated for the color of his hair, or his skin.

Seven more, he thinks, stepping outside Uzushio’s gates at dawn. Gaara is one step behind, grim and vivid in the rising light, wearing full shinobi gear even though lately he’s dressed down to help with the reconstruction. Haku is just inside the gates, looking unhappy, but Naruto won’t let him be present for this. Not with the amount of things that could go wrong. Not with the amount of power they’ll likely be throwing around.

There are seven more of us, and I have no doubt our situations are at least similar.

Naruto has his faults, but cowardice has never, ever been one of them. And now, with so much riding on him, with so many people depending on him, how can he shrink back from something like this? It could hurt them, but it could also help them, because Naruto has no doubt that Kiri is still a threat, or that some other country will see Uzushio as easy pickings.

They're still a small village, still vulnerable. But Naruto will not let Uzushio fall again.

The northeast coast of Whirlpool Country is a barren, rocky place, uninhabited by all but the most stubborn fishermen and a few scattered souls. It’s here that Naruto leads Gaara, picking his way around weather-worn boulders and storm-tossed driftwood until they’re at the very edge of the land where it falls off into the ocean. The wind is still night-cool off the water, and a few scattered clouds cling to the brightening horizon, but from the cliff to the edge of the forest behind them, there’s no other life.

Naruto takes a slow, deep breath, and leaps up to sit cross-legged on the top of the nearest boulder. “You're ready?” he asks Gaara, who touches the side of his gourd and nods once. Naruto offers him a smile, as bright and brave as he can make it, and closes his eyes, letting the outside world fall away.

It’s a tunnel like the one leading to Uzushio's heart that greets him, wide and dark, but a soft sort of darkness, with seals that flicker and flare on the walls. He spares a moment to look them over—minor genjutsus, mostly, anchored in place with fuinjutsu to make them long-lasting and more powerful, all directed at serenity of mind and peace of heart. Mood modifiers, Saehara-sensei used to call them. Influences more than attacks. And there are many of them, all subtly different but following a definite theme.

Still, it’s a good sign, this place’s appearance. Naruto smiles, brushes his fingers over the nearest seal, and heads down the hall, towards the wide double doors at the end. This place looks like the Uzushio’s heart—a secret, but a good one. Something to protect. Something to save his village.

He pushes the doors open and steps into the cool white light of the circular room, and laughs softly, because he’s not the twelve-year-old he should be right now. His hands are his own, the ones he
remembers from his last lifetime, right down to the scar on his palm that Fuyu gave him in training, which never quite faded. His hair is a familiar weight over his shoulders, bright blond bleached pale by the sun, and his hitai-ate is around his head. Naruto knows without looking what the symbol will be—the right one, and he loves Konoha too, but it’s not his the way Uzushio is.

There’s a sound in the darkness, and when he looks up from his study of his hands there are sharp eyes on him, a huge form curled within the shadows. Naruto can only just make out the whisper of nine tails across the stone as the Kyuubi pulls himself to his feet.

“You're not that brat,” the Kyuubi growls, eyes narrowing. “Who are you?”

“But I am,” Naruto corrects, and his heart is beating a tattoo in his throat. “I'm more me than I have been in twelve years. And you're the Kyuubi. Mito-sama never spoke of you much.”

That gets him a harsh, growling laugh, and the Kyuubi steps forward, out of the shadows. Naruto holds his ground, feet planted and eyes on the bijuu, greatest of the nine.

“Of course she didn’t,” the fox scoffs, stalking around Naruto in a tight circle, though he never comes closer than the outermost ring of stone. “Why talk about a burden, a prisoner? Why talk about the one that she enslaved?”

Naruto meets the Kyuubi’s eyes as squarely as he can, given the differences in their sizes. He knows the story, as well as anyone. All of Uzushio did, because Mito was one of theirs. “If she hadn’t, Madara would have kept controlling you,” he says softly, but firmly. “He would have used you to destroy Konoha, and then he’d have probably moved on to all the other villages as well.”

“You think that matters to me?” the fox roars, lunging forward only to come up short as the pale grey floor flares with light, holding him back. Naruto doesn’t move.

“I think it should,” he says evenly. “It would only have created more hatred, more fear.”

The fox scoffs, resuming its circling. “You say that as if I feel anything but loathing for you puny humans,” he growls. “Humanity is a disease. If I had it my way, I’d wipe you all out.”

Naruto takes a deep breath, closes his eyes, and lets it out slowly. “I used to hate the people of Konoha,” he whispers, a confession he’s never made to anyone else. “But hate is so dark. If I hate, and they hate, then there's never a chance for anything different. Only more and more hatred, piling up on top of itself. I don’t want to hate people, and I don’t want to hate you. You're the strongest of the bijuu, and older than I can imagine. You must be so wise, and…I'm not. I'm just human. But I want to protect those precious to me, and I think, if you help me, we can both stop the hatred here.” He opens his eyes, looks up at the warily silent Kyuubi, and smiles. Grins, because he can imagine it, a future of peace and hope and home, and whether the Kyuubi helps him or not, that’s what he’ll always strive for.

“I'm Naruto,” he says, a peace offering, a hand extended across the vast gulf that separates them. “Uzumaki Naruto. Or Arashi, if you’d rather call me that.”

There's a long moment of silence before it’s broken by a sharp snort. “‘Storm’ or ‘fishcake’, really? No third option?”

And Naruto laughs, bright in the soft darkness, and steps forward towards his personal demon—his hope for the future, for his people’s future—with a smile.
Youko is bright and curious and clearly restraining himself, but his eyes are alight and his smile honest as they meander through the market. Sasuke isn’t entirely certain why he’s still here, since he got the information he came for, more or less, and Youko does indeed have an entire ANBU squad following him. But at the same time, he’s all too aware. Youko is a connection to Naruto, an immediate and existing one when for years Sasuke has been chasing half-formed ghosts and halfhearted whispers.

“Youko, I came for the information you have on the shinobi from the Hidden Leaf Village who infiltrated the Sand Village. Sasuke might have a lead, but I believe you’re the one who should be consulted. It’d be only fair to consider all options before moving forward.”

Sasuke looks out over the crowd, trying to see what Youko does, but can’t. “Different?” he asks after a moment, because here’s yet another tie to Naruto. His new village must be…easy to love, if he hasn’t come home once in almost seven years.

With a low, thoughtful hum, Youko tips his head back, bells chiming softly. “It’s…beautiful,” he says at length, and the curve of his smile is clear despite the mask. “Our Shodaime raised the land that Uzushio is on from the sea, and then pulled most of the stone for the buildings right from the ground. He and a handful of others made the city with chakra, pulled it together in the space of a month, and it’s…easy to tell. Uzushio was built with more of an eye for beauty than most hidden villages have. Lots of columns and curving paths and different city levels overlooking the bay. It’s…gorgeous.” He laughs, and Sasuke can hear it in his voice, the wonder, the awe, the almost desperate edge of adoration for a collection of buildings. He can't understand it, but he can hear it as plain as day.

Youko sweeps a hand out in front of them, encompassing the market and the streets beyond, and says, “Konoha is…busy. There’s so much life here, and Uzushio is similar. But…different, too. Smaller, definitely, and the air feels strange here in comparison.” His smile is warm, if a little helpless as he gestures, clearly at a loss for words. “Just…Konoha is painted in green and brown—earth tones. Uzushio is blue and red and gold, sea and sky and sunset.”

Sasuke…doesn’t understand. Can’t comprehend what it is to talk about a place with such barely-hidden devotion. He likes Konoha, is fond of it, appreciates it as a place to live and grow, and of course he’ll fight to the death for it, but that’s more for the people there. Youko talks of Uzushio as if the village itself is a person to defend and cherish.

He’s thought of leaving, before. Just up and walking out the gates, dismissing everyone here and striking out on his own to find Naruto—or his brother, in his darker moments. Konoha holds no permanent attachments for him, no inescapable ties. It’s Sasuke's village, his home, and there's a certain amount of pride that comes with that, but not nearly as much as Youko shows in his own village in the space of a few words.

Before he can say anything, though, a whisper of familiar chakra touches his senses, and he glances across the busy market to see his first teacher slip out of the crowd. Beside him, Youko goes very still and ever so slightly tense, but Sasuke supposes that’s understandable. After all, most foreign shinobi have nightmares about Kakashi of the Sharingan coming towards them. And Youko said himself that everyone in Uzushio is a returned refugee, of the city by way of somewhere else, so it’s possible Youko has even crossed blades with Kakashi before.

Kakashi makes a show of looking around before spotting them, but Sasuke isn’t a stupid twelve-year-old genin anymore, and he doesn’t believe it for a moment. Hatake Kakashi is a master at playing the fool, but underneath that, he’s observant and canny and powerful enough to be one of Konoha's single greatest weapons. Having the man teach him everything he knows about the
Sharingan—and in the process revealing that the perverted, eternally tardy man has a Mangekyo Sharingan—opened Sasuke's eyes to that fact very quickly.

“Yo,” the Copy-Nin says cheerfully as he approaches, raising a hand in a lazy wave. “Entertaining our guest, Sasuke?”

“Hn.” Sasuke folds his arms over his chest and narrows his eyes at his former jounin instructor, able to guess the reason for his presence. Kakashi has been nearly as obsessive about finding Naruto as he has, after all. There's no way he’d have missed the connection with Uzushio.

Kakashi gives him a long, speaking look, then turns one eye, crinkled in a smile that's likely entirely false, on the blond nin. “Hatake Kakashi,” he says brightly. “Welcome to Konoha.”

There's a split second of hesitation, just enough to be noticeable, and then the other shinobi inclines his head. “…Uzumaki Youko,” he answers slowly. “You are…Sakumo’s son.”

Kakashi goes very, very still and very, very quiet. He says nothing, but even the fake smile drops away, to leave a wary watchfulness in his visible eye. Sasuke, for his part, is equal parts guarded and impressed. Four words to put one of Konoha's greatest off balance, four words and half a moment’s contemplation. That’s…a very effective battle tactic.

Youko folds his arms, tucking his hands into the sleeves of his deep green kimono top as though he hasn’t a care in the world, but he's a shinobi. It's more than likely he’s carrying weapons in there, and knows just what sort of dangerous ground he’s stepped on.

“That’s not,” Kakashi says softly and at length, “the first thing most people say.”

Youko's eyes crinkle ever so slightly, and he inclines his head, the bells chiming softly with the movement. “I'm older than I look,” is his reply. “I met him several times, and regardless of what people say, he was a great man. Very strong. Our Sandaime was fond of him.”

That eases a small portion of the tension from Kakashi’s shoulders, but not much. “Uzumaki Arashi—my father mentioned him,” the Copy-Nin acknowledges with a faint nod. A pause, a beat, and then he visibly uncoils, clearly forcing himself to relax, and the idiotic eye-smile comes back. “Maa. I like your mask.”

Sasuke's face meets his palm, and he has to strangle a groan.

Thankfully, Youko just rolls with the incredibly unsubtle change of subject, though an amused smile is clearly curling his lips. “Thank you,” he says with mock gravity. “Yours is very nice as well. I had considered bandages, but they don’t have quite the right…flair.”

Kakashi beams at him, tucking his hands into his pockets. “I was headed to lunch,” he offers cheerfully. “Would you two care to join me?”

Sasuke's stomach chooses that moment to remind him that he had skipped dinner in favor of hitting the bar last night, and breakfast this morning in favor of escaping Ino and Sakura's clutches. It gives a loud rumble, but Sasuke refuses to be embarrassed, stalking past Kakashi’s stupid snickers with his head held high. “You're paying,” he threatens, leaping up to the rooftop in a quick bound.

The sound of bells follows as Youko mimics him, and Sasuke wonders how the man can ever win a fight with those things giving away each of his movements. Perhaps he’s simply fast enough that it doesn’t matter, but it still seems like a foolish risk.

There's always someone faster, after all.
“Ramen?” Kakashi suggests, joining them on the tiles and heading off without waiting for an answer. Sasuke rolls his eyes, knowing it wasn’t a suggestion at all, but rather a conscious decision to pick the cheapest place possible, and follows. After a moment Youko falls into step with him, thoughtfully silent with his eyes fixed on Kakashi’s back, and Sasuke is curious as to the history there. There’s surely something, with Kakashi’s reaction being what it was, but he’s never heard anyone mention Kakashi’s father directly. Hatake isn’t exactly a common family name, and the only other use Sasuke can think of is Hatake Sakumo, Konoha’s White Fang, but Sasuke only has the most basic knowledge of him and nothing in regards to his family.

Of course, until yesterday Sasuke had never even heard of a Hidden Village in Whirlpool Country, so he supposes that it’s possible he’s lacking in some areas of his education.

But he won’t pry. Kakashi is…complicated.

(He remembers, a month and a half after Naruto’s disappearance, that he played a prank. It was an impulse, a mad idea, but the woman who was his target had always been especially rude to Naruto when they pulled weeds for her; bringing Sakura and Sasuke cookies and lemonade and conveniently forgetting the blond, ignoring him and sneering when she thought Kakashi wasn’t watching. It had always made something tight and hard form in Sasuke’s gut, something like indignation or anger, or maybe simply disgust. So when she had passed him in the street and smiled at him, smiled when there was absolutely nothing in the world to be happy about because Naruto was gone, he’d pranked her. He’d pranked her and run, heart in his throat as he fled, half-expecting to look back and find an ANBU on his tail with every step he took.

He’d ended up a tree at the edge of the village, huddled deep in the branches and shaking like he never had from a mission. Shaking and at the same time fighting laughter, because what the hell was he doing? He, Uchiha Sasuke, youngest son of the Uchiha Clan Head and self-proclaimed avenger, had played a prank.

And he’d liked it.

It had been satisfying.

Something had moved above him, but he hadn’t reacted beyond raising his head from his arms. Kakashi hadn’t looked at him, hadn’t moved his eyes from his book at all, but he’d said, “Do you remember when I said my best friend’s name was on the memorial?”

Certain this was going to be a lecture, or another try at sympathy, Sasuke had turned away without answering.

Kakashi had simply hummed in response. When he spoke again, his voice was warm and fond and all the things Sasuke was entirely unused to hearing from him. “His name was Uchiha Obito, and he was…ridiculous. Always late, always giving the most ridiculous excuses as though we couldn’t see right through them. Always cheerful no matter what the situation was.”

That had made Sasuke look at him, heart in his throat again, and he’d tried to swallow it down enough to speak. Had failed, but…that was fine. More than fine, because he couldn’t find the words regardless.

“Uchiha?” he had asked at last, and… Kakashi having one Sharingan had made an awful, tragic kind of sense then.

Kakashi had nodded. Hadn’t looked at him, but answered with a clear smile, even through the mask, “Yes. Obito.”
And maybe it wasn’t good. Maybe it wasn’t even *better*. But it was…enough, if only for the moment. A memory and a reminder and just…

Enough.)
First Movement: Lost Son Dissonance

Chapter Notes

This next week is going to be the week from hell for me, so I'm exercising my fairly rusty self-preservation skills and declaring a brief pause in updates.

In other words, NO UPDATE NEXT TUESDAY. UPDATES WILL RESUME AS USUAL ON 22/9. I'm really very sorry about this, but unfortunately my department head won't take 'But I was writing fanfiction!' as an excuse for not finishing my paperwork. :

[Dissonance: Harsh, discordant, characterized by a lack of harmony. Also a chord that sounds incomplete until it resolves itself on a harmonious chord.]

Kakashi hasn’t changed much, at least that Naruto can see. He’s still laid-back and lazily attentive, his visible eye sharp behind his heavy-lidded look of aloofness. Sakumo was never like that, at least the handful of times Naruto met him as Arashi. The elder Hatake was driven and fierce and focused, and moreover he never tried to hide it. His son does, though—he hides and buries and conceals, until Naruto has to wonder if even Kakashi himself knows what’s a mask and what isn’t.

He…regrets it, that he had to bring Sakumo into things, because he’s read the records, learned what happened and how it clearly effected Kakashi. But out of all the people in Konoha, Kakashi has the greatest likelihood of divining just who Youko is—just who Arashi is, even. For all of Kakashi’s playing at being a good-for-nothing pervert (and again, how much of that is a mask is debatable; Naruto wants to say all of it, but…), he’s honestly a little terrifying. Sakumo has nothing on his son, when Kakashi actually gets serious. And he’s suspicious of everyone, of every little misstep or even the steps taken correctly. Always expecting betrayal or foul play from anyone he doesn’t call a friend. Naruto can't take that risk, not now. Not here.

Not with Sasuke—

Naruto cuts off that thought, glances at his friend—and truly, his friend, and he can be sure of that now. He vanished seven years ago, and I've been looking for him ever since. Sasuke has been looking for him, trying to find him, to the point where he would risk offending an envoy from a foreign power to get his answers—because Naruto saw that moment of violence barely restrained, when he first refused to answer. Just a half-second of tension, a spark of fury, but—

But it was there. But Sasuke cares, and it makes something in Naruto's chest flip and whirl in light, breathless loops.

When he had left, he’d thought they wouldn’t miss him. Not that he was so caught up in remorse or self-pity that he thought they wouldn’t notice, but he’d…expected it to be less in their eyes than other things, like rebuilding or appointing their new Kage or, well, most things. Iruka was precious but always busy; the Sandaime was dead; Kakashi was amiable, but distant; Sakura had never really seemed to care, as much as he wished otherwise; and Sasuke…

Well. Sasuke was Sasuke, and all the twilight meetings and missions and monsters faced down together weren’t enough to put a dent in his armor.
But, apparently, Naruto leaving was.

(And it just figures, doesn’t it? To get closer to his teammate all he had to do was remove himself to the far side of the continent with no intention of returning.)

It takes...effort not to call out a greeting to Teuchi when they duck into the stand, effort not to grin at Ayame standing behind the counter with a smile. But the mere thought of what Haku would likely do to him if he let his disguise slip so easily has him holding back a faint wince, and keeping his smile to a normal level as he nods to the father and daughter.

“Afternoon,” Teuchi greets cheerfully. “What will you have?”

Ichiraku is so automatic that it’s dangerous. Naruto closes his lips on the order of pork ramen that wants to come out, not because he thinks it will tell them exactly who he is—it’s not like Naruto was the only one to ever order pork—but because little clues often lead up to big revelations, and he can’t afford to give anything away, not at this stage in the game.

“Miso, please,” Kakashi orders brightly, though Naruto can still feel his occasional glance like sandpaper against his composure.

“The usual,” Sasuke puts in with a nod, and glances over at Naruto. Naruto bites back the nervous flutter in his stomach, fights it down until he doesn’t have to think about Sasuke’s sharp-dark eyes on him anymore, and makes a show of looking over the menu.

“Shōyu ramen for me, thanks.” He smiles at Teuchi from beneath his mask, and can’t help but regret the subterfuge that he and Haku have immersed themselves in. what would it be like, to come back as himself? What would Sasuke have said, done, if it had been Naruto at the gate instead of Youko? Tsunade, Kakashi, Ino, Neji—any and all of them, what would they have said? Because the Naruto returning isn’t the same Naruto that left. Remembering his time as Arashi fully, Uzushio and being a Kage, his understanding with Kurama, his new friends, his people—they’ve all changed him, and he likes to think it’s for the better.

The feeling of eyes—or an eye, as it were—on him draws him out of his thoughts, and he blinks at the sight of Kakashi staring at him. “Yes?” he asks politely, inwardly rolling his own eyes. Kakashi is very good at playing not-subtle, for all that he’s actually an underhanded bastard.

Kakashi smiles at him, bright and cheerful and probably without an ounce of honesty behind it, and says, “If you knew my father, you must have known the Sannin as well. And the Yondaime.”

Naruto met Sarutobi’s students, twice when they were genin and then at various other times when they were older, and he laughs a little to himself, remembering the first time. Three wide-eyed children, Orochimaru solemn and Tsunade enthusiastic and Jiraiya boisterous, standing in their teacher’s shadow as the two Kages conversed. Naruto had never quite had time for a genin team of his own, back when he was Arashi, and that’s another regret to be laid at the feet of the time’s unfltering tension. Too much war, too many battles and petty quarrels and not enough peace, never enough peace. But maybe now, with Uzushio returned and finally a power to rival any two of the Great Nations—or more—perhaps now peace can have a chance.

“I met the Sannin,” he allows, looking back up to meet Kakashi’s gaze. “Not Namikaze, though. He was a child when Uzushio fell the first time—probably still an Academy student, if I’m remembering his age correctly, and after that there was simply never a chance before he died.”

Entirely true, with the added bonus of being entirely misleading. Naruto never did get the chance to meet his father, not until he and Kurama called up enough power between them to activate the
failsafe in the seal. But that’s bittersweet, and not something Naruto likes to dwell on, so he pushes that aside as well and gives Kakashi a smile. “Ah, that reminds me. Do you have a memorial for those killed in action? There are a few old friends I need to say hello to.”

Kakashi studies him for a long moment, and there’s a weight to that gaze, something heavy and cool and hard, like steel. He says nothing, though, and it’s Sasuke who nods.

“I can show you after we eat,” the brunet offers, casting a sharp glance at their former teacher before he turns his attention back to the bowl being set in front of him. With a grunt of thanks, he picks up his chopsticks and digs in.

“Here you are,” Ayame says brightly, placing another bowl in front of Naruto with a smile. “Enjoy.”

“Thank you,” Naruto murmurs back, but with the thought of the memorial heavy on his chest, it’s hard to work up his usual enthusiasm. Maybe that’s a good thing, though, seeing as Kakashi is still watching him. Sideways and on the sly, maybe, but Naruto has been a ninja for almost twice as long as the Copy-Nin, all told, and it’s nowhere near as sneaky as he seems to think it is. Naruto casts him a look, brow arching slightly, and turns back to his meal. Eating through the mask is tricky, but not impossible, and he’s already fairly distracted by what he needs to do.

He has a promise to Kagami to fulfil, after all.

(“They're marrying me off,” Kagami says flatly, leaning against the waist-high wall that runs around the top of the watch tower.

Seated beside him, legs dangling over the drop and eyes fixed on the ocean before them, Naruto lets out a soft breath of unsurprised resignation. “Can you honestly say you weren’t expecting it?” he asks gently, but he doesn’t look away from where the sky disappears into the sea. “Given your bloodline—”

Kagami scoffs, mouth pulled into a tight, unhappy line. He’s not normally one for brooding, bright and happy and enthusiastic to a fault, but when he does it’s easier than ever to see the family resemblance that’s usually so well-hidden.

“My bloodline,” he huffs, jerking away from the wall to stalk across the roof. It’s too small for much, just a few strides across in each direction, but he makes use of it to pace as best he can, throwing his hands up for good measure. Naruto doesn’t look—he’s seen this show before, whenever Kagami’s father was being especially unbearable. “My bloodline? You mean what those old, wrinkled bastards can't understand, will never understand! It’s not like there's more than an infinitesimal chance of me passing it on, even if I do what they want and ‘reproduce for the good of the clan’.” He makes a sound of disgust and throws himself back against the wall, sliding down to sit on the roof with his arms crossed, looking for all the world like a pouting child.

Naruto wants to be sympathetic and outraged on behalf of his friend, but he’s also a Kage, and he knows very well how politics tend to play out. And the Uchiha Clan is nothing if not a breeding ground for political plays and power-grabs. They're not so much a family as a self-contained soap opera, honestly. And even if he tried to help, he’s the head of a foreign power, no matter how friendly with Konoha. For all his ability to broker trade agreements and peace treaties, he’s powerless in the face of his best friend’s personal life. It grates, but he and Kagami have walked this path before, attempting to get the Uchiha out from under his father’s thumb, and Naruto knows exactly how it plays out.
With a heavy groan, Kagami drags his palms over his face and then blows out a breath, scuffing his fingers through his straight, chin-length hair. He’s stockier than the average Uchiha, more given to a gymnast’s muscles than a dancer’s build, and shorter than normal, though he’s still a good three inches taller than Naruto. Another thing to set him apart, beyond his heritage, which is unique even among the other variations of the Sharingan.

“I don’t even *know* her,” he complains, and Naruto smiles sadly. Kagami is a romantic at heart, no matter how many times his father tried to make him otherwise, or to get him to face ‘a shinobi’s reality’. He’s a fan of forbidden romances and love at first sight, fated loves and despite-the-odds and happy endings.

“And she’s not Azami,” he finishes, because it needs to be said, even if Kagami isn’t willing to do it. Kagami closes his eyes, leaning his head back against the sun-warmed stone with a sigh. “No,” he agrees. “She’s not Azami.”

“Kagami,” Naruto starts, but his friend cuts him off with a shake of his head. “Stop it, Arashi,” he huffs. “I *know*. Whatever you're about to say, I’ve probably said it to myself at least twenty times, okay? I *know* our families are enemies. I *know* we don’t have a chance. But she’s…”

“No an Uchiha,” Naruto murmurs, keeping his tone light. He’s divorced from the whole situation, living in Uzushio as he does, and only knows what he hears from Kagami between the diplomat’s trips back to Konoha. But Kagami’s only ever had good things to say about Azami, even before they got stuck together on an S-rank mission and he came back with hearts in his eyes and a mantra of *I’m in love* with which to drive Naruto to distraction. It sounds like something off a stage, feuding families with their children in love, but the reality of it isn’t quite so theatrical. There’s a lot of pining, honestly, and carefully measured conversations in public places, longing glances and stern talking-tos from the clan elders. Naruto sympathizes, he honestly does, but unless Kagami and Azami elope and seek sanctuary in Uzushio, there's not much he can do. And even then, he can't afford to start a war, to involve his people in a clash between two former allies over his childhood friend. Being Uzukage means he can't take risks. Not with his people’s lives.

“Yeah,” Kagami agrees with a sigh, then shakes his head and looks away, out over the red roofs that march in grand array up the feet of the surrounding hills. “I just…Hisae is gentle, from what I’ve heard. Kind. A jounin, and she has the Sharingan. But…I want someone who can *match* me, Arashi, not a meek and gentle wife. Did you know that Azami can't cook? Last time she tried to make me dinner she set my apartment on fire. I didn’t think that kind of thing happened outside of cheesy shoujo manga. And she yells at me, and smacks me in the head when I’m being stupid, and I just—”

He spreads his hands helplessly. “She’s the only thing I’ve ever really wanted for myself, Arashi. How can anyone compete with that? How can I give that up?”

Naruto doesn’t have an answer, but he curls a hand around Kagami’s shoulder and grips it tightly, a poor attempt at comfort.

Kagami lets out a long, slow breath and reaches up to lay his hand over Naruto's, fingers closing desperately over the Uzukage's.

“I won't,” he whispers, loud in the stillness between them. “I *won't* give it up.”

And Naruto closes his eyes and turns his face away, out towards the calm azure sea, to where he can
feel clouds gathering just over the horizon.

He can't imagine this will end in anything but tragedy.

Kagami’s name is right where Naruto remembers it, slightly faded by time and weather but still readable. He crouches in front of the stone, reaching out to trace his fingers over the carved lines. There’s another Uchiha Kagami here, written as ‘mirror’, but his Kagami’s name uses different kanji and is easy to tell apart.

Sasuke is three paces behind him, silent and still, and Naruto wonders if he’s speaking to his own fallen friends and family, if anyone on this stone is familiar to him. There are too many names that Naruto knows, far too many for his comfort, and Sarutobi Hiruzen is just the latest in a string of them.

Senju Azami’s name is several above Kagami’s, stark and bold. ‘Thistle flower,’ it means, and from what Kagami told him it suited her personality. He remembers Kagami’s grief, when she died, remembers the hunted, haunted look on his face for months afterwards—right up until he left Uzushio and never returned.

There was a child, Naruto knows. A son. Kagami named him godfather and inundated him with pictures until the mere threat of photos made Uzushio’s fearless Storm God cringe. Azami’s son, not Hisae’s, and Naruto has to wonder what kind of life the child lived, growing up the child of two families traditionally at odds with one another. Because Azami had died barely a month after the birth, called away on a diplomatic mission that needed to be handled by one of the last living members of her clan, only to have it go south halfway through. And Kagami, with his own duty to fulfil, had only been able to see the boy a handful of times.

Naruto recognizes the boy’s name, carved into the damned memorial. Another loss for Kagami’s family, another point of tragedy in Naruto’s own life. Not that he really expected differently, given the circumstances surrounding the Uchiha Clan. And especially not given the boy’s own circumstances.

A child born outside of an arranged marriage, to a mother considered an enemy of the clan, but left with the betrayed wife to be raised like a full-blooded Uchiha—Naruto can’t imagine what the boy suffered. He loved Kagami, loves him still, but some of his choices left much to be desired.

Not that it matters much anymore, Naruto supposes. Uchiha Itachi took care of that. Even if the boy had survived childhood, become an upstanding member of his clan—and perhaps it happened, perhaps Hisae truly was kind enough to raise a child not her own until her death—he more than likely was killed in the massacre. Only Sasuke himself escaped the slaughter that night, after all.

“All Uchiha?” Sasuke asks, as if spurred by the thought.

Naruto nods slowly, rising to his feet and settling the lilies he brought before the stone. “The very best Uchiha,” he says, allowing himself a faint smile. Kagami made poor decisions, yes, but Naruto knows as well as anyone that the Uchiha are quite literally mad for love. All the emotional suppression in the world—which Kagami, of course, never believed in—can only take them so far from their curse, given how tightly it’s tied up with their bloodline. And Kagami was always cheerful, always willing to help in any way he was needed. Headstrong and brave and oddly insightful, a good friend and a terrible foe. As Arashi, Naruto met his fair share of Uchiha, but he’ll always think of Kagami as the very best of them, even factoring in geniuses like Itachi and the first Kagami, the Nidaime Hokage’s aide.
He steps back with a soft sigh, remembering Kagami’s grin, his wisdom, his steadfast friendship through years and battles and natural disasters, deaths and births and the threat of war. And somehow, somehow, Suna forces managed to get so very far behind Konoha’s lines, managed to lie in wait for a single messenger, moving fast and secretly, and killed him despite his bloodline, despite the power and uniqueness of his Sharingan. Despite the fact that in a fight no one ever touched Kagami.

Somehow, Kagami was killed when he shouldn’t have even been in danger, killed by a squad of shinobi almost an entire country away from where they should have been, and Naruto doesn’t think it paranoia to lay this at Danzo’s door as well. Because Uzushio had held out for the required fifteen days and then more besides, Arashi sure that Kagami had simply been held up by politics, and it was only afterwards, twenty-five days into a siege Uzushio wasn’t prepared for, that he had realized something must have happened. That Kagami had failed and Konoha wasn’t coming, that Uzushio was on its own against the might of a village twice its size and well-equipped to fight a war. Well-equipped to fight a war against Uzushio in particular, with knowledge of the city’s forces that no one but an Uzushio shinobi should have had, and a high-ranking shinobi at that.

Or a well-placed one, as Reisi was, being the beloved nephew of the Uzukage’s trusted assistant.

Why? Naruto asks silently, staring at the memorial, not sure if he’s directing the question at Danzo or the gods themselves. Why would you do it? We were no threat to Konoha. We never had been. We shared everything, secrets and seals and techniques. Why would you destroy us when we only ever offered friendship? How many people died, just because of one paranoid, war-mongering bastard? How many of my people? And why did no one ever notice that there was something more to all of this? Not even Saru—

But then, Hiruzen had always been far too trusting of his own people, and of Danzo in particular.

But he won’t get away with it. Not a minute longer.

Naruto reaches out, brushes his fingers over Kagami’s name once more, over his godson’s name, and then turns away. He smiles at Sasuke, bright and cheerful even though it feels like his heart is breaking, like the steel of his determination is the only thing carrying him forward.

Sasuke looks back at him, tall and proud and nothing like Kagami, but at the same time holding an equal vein of bullheaded, devoted strength within himself. His dark eyes aren’t quite sympathetic, because they’re hardly friends—at least, Sasuke and Youko aren’t—but there’s an understanding in them, a kind of reluctant kinship only grudgingly admitted to. Loss and loneliness and families found at long last, and Naruto lets his fingers rest just briefly on Sasuke’s shoulder as he steps past.

“Thanks,” he murmurs, and turns away, back towards the inn and Haku. Back to what he came here for.

Back to his plotting, and back to their plans to bring Danzo down.

High up, silhouetted against the clear blue of the summer sky, a white gyrfalcon gives a keening cry and folds its wings, plummeting towards its master. The message canister bound to its leg flashes in the sun as it descends, and Naruto turns to look, one hand raised to shield his eyes.

No clouds in that sky, not yet, but he wonders why he feels they should be gathering all the same.
Hi! Yes, this is technically this coming Tuesday’s update, but my week from hell is stretching and I want to make sure this actually gets posted. Next update will be the following Tuesday, like normal. Again, many, many apologies for missing last week. You guys are very patient with me, and you totally rock. :)

Naruto is angry.

But no, because anger is a simmer, a flame from a campfire, a touch of heat beneath the skin, and this is nothing like that. Because Naruto is furious, raging, and it's an eruption, a spark that leaps into the trees and sets an entire forest alight, a sun-searing burn at his core that's eating him from the inside out. He's breathless with it, speechless, shattered and haphazardly stitched back together with the fury seeping out between the seams.

Haku is too quiet, his dark eyes on Naruto as the blond paces their rooms. Curled on the bed with his legs drawn up under him, and he looks like a child, like something delicate, a sculpture carved of the most fragile ice and left to the mercy of the sun. Like something with edges so sharp they can't be seen, poised to cut even if they don't know what to cut yet. Even if there's no enemy here, leagues and days from their home.

Their home which is threatened.

Their home which needs them, needs them there and needs them here and needs them in both places at once, striking down the danger.

Kiri again, and when Naruto closes his eyes all he can see is a red sun rising, the gates falling, the walls crumbling before the invading forces. There's a knife at his jugular, blood a cherry-red, warm-hot spill against his skin, and the corpses of his people, his village, all around him. Yui with blood from a head wound turning her face into a mask of crimson fury. Shunka with her teeth bared and murder in her eyes, short swords in hand and gore painting her clothes. Haru standing guard over the fallen body of his father, regardless of the kunai stabbed deep into his skin. Fuyu pacing Naruto in a rush to the wall, only to die taking a jutsu meant for him.

It was a war, a brutal, bloody war that was absolutely pointless, because Uzushio made sure that even though Kiri claimed victory that day, they paid dearly for it, paid with blood and bodies and corpses on the sand. Uzushio was destroyed and Kiri lost the majority of their army, and an entire country was scattered for decades, unable to find a home.

Naruto won't let it happen again. Uzushio has five jinchuuriki to call upon this time, plenty of skilled jounin and chuunin and a city that will not let her people be driven from her once more, not for anything. They have allies besides Konoha, deals with one of the Sannin and the friendship of the Raikage's brother and one of Kumo's greatest kunoichi. They have Naruto, who is Arashi, who is Naruto, who will never, ever let the past repeat itself. Who came back from the dead to do what he failed to last time, and save his people.
He doesn't want a war, doesn't want to risk it, but by the gods, if Kiri starts one Naruto will see that Uzushio finishes it. For good.

A breath, another, slow and steady and controlled, and he's finally dragging himself back from the edge, channeling the Kage that he's been twice over, shoving everything not absolutely essential down deep where it can't touch him. Slow breaths, careful, measured in every motion until his throat finally unclenches enough for him to speak. His anger has always been an eruption, a geyser, shooting up red-hot and then fading quickly, and Naruto is thankful for it. He opens his eyes, staring at the bland white wall in front of him, licks his lips and then says deliberately, "You have to go back, Haku."

Haku rises from the bed like a viper uncoiling, eyes narrowed and expression foreboding. "Naruto," he begins warningly.

"No," Naruto cuts him off, sharp and firm and trying not to show the tremor deep within himself, the vein of uncertainty in his resolve. He's never been good at picking between options, instead always attempting to power through on the idea that nothing's impossible, that he really can do everything. But even with Shadow Clones he can't be everywhere at once, not at distances like the one between Uzushio and Konoha. "No, Haku, I have to see this through. Danzo needs to pay for what he's done before he's given any more opportunities to fuck everything up. It's bad enough he knows Uzushio is back, but we're going to have two more jinchuuriki here soon enough, along with half of our genin teams, and I don't want them to have to spend every damn minute on the lookout for someone who might slit their throats. In a fight against Root, I'm the better choice, and for dealing with Kiri, it's you. We don't know that they're looking for trouble, and as a bloodline child who escaped the purges you'll at least get a bit of sympathy with Terumi's supporters. And after traveling with Zabuza, you know more about the situation than anyone except Suigetsu, who's absolutely lousy at politics."

"You're asking me to abandon my Uzukage," Haku says mildly, but Naruto isn't fooled. A mild Haku is the most dangerous kind. "You are asking me to leave my Uzukage in the middle of a hostile situation with no allies and no backup, facing down a mad, genius chess-master who orchestrated your death the last time around. I love you, Naruto, and I would die for you. You are my purpose in living and the source of all my happiness, but please, don't ask this of me."

Naruto huffs out a groan, raking a hand through his hair only for his fingers to catch in the thin braids and yank. He winces, but says softly, "Haku, there's no other choice. You're my left hand. If anyone can deal with this, and do it well enough to keep us from another pointless war, it's you. Please." He studies Haku's mulish face, the stubborn line of his mouth coupled with the wavering will in his eyes, and softens his voice. "Haku. Please. I won't make it an order, but...please."

There's a long, long minute as Haku visibly wars with himself. Then, with a heavy sigh, he raises his hands in defeat. "Gaara is going to kill me," he says with resignation. "He is going to brutally murder me, and then when he marches off to raze Kirigakure to the ground he will use my mangled body as his victory banner."

"You," Naruto informs his friend dryly, "are being a tiny bit overdramatic."

"I don't think so," Haku disagrees sweetly, and a sweet Haku is even more dangerous than a mild one. "However, I will inform the others of your current status so that we will know where to look when Danzo dumps your body somewhere out of the way."

"Haku—" One sharp-edged look, and Naruto snaps his mouth shut and shuffles out of the line of fire, letting the brunet pack in peace.

"I knew I should have just become a fisherman," he bemoans, though he keeps his voice down.
"I'd definitely get more respect that way."

There's a sigh, a huff, and Haku settles in beside him on the bed, bumping their shoulders together. "Never," he promises, but he's smiling. "You'd be an awful fisherman, Naruto."

Naruto gives in and grins back at him, swift and bright, and tips to the side to lightly knock their heads together. "Probably," he agrees mirthfully. "You're not the first person to say that, you know."

Haku kisses his forehead, caught—as ever—somewhere between mother, brother, and big sister, and murmurs, "You'll be careful?"

"Of course," Naruto answers, and they both pretend that it's not the blatant lie it really is.

He sees Haku off at the gate, watched closely by their ever-present guard, and endures another round of whispered warnings to be on his best behavior and as careful as humanly possible before Haku takes his leave, moving so fast he's little more than a blur. And then Naruto is on his own again, left in Konoha with all of his memories and the people he abandoned once, falling the call of his past. Left with Sasuke who's searched for him, Kakashi who cares, Iruka who was the last to see him, and Tsunade who mourns him. Left with Danzo who was indirectly responsible for his death.

He feels a little lost, a touch adrift, because over the last half a decade he's forgotten how it is to be alone, even though he spent his entire childhood learning. But there's a mission, something to focus on, and Naruto turns his attention to that. He ignores the ANBU in the shadows, turning his senses to picking out the Root members in the crowd, identifying each by the seal that keeps them silent as he wanders through Konoha's streets.

There, coming out of the Yamanaka flower shop.

There, by the weapons shop.

Another and another and another, and Naruto has little doubt as to how Danzo gets 'recruits'. Orphans, probably, children who won't be missed. He remembers Reisi, the desperation in his eyes, and is glad that the mask means he doesn't have to work to keep a smile.

_Protecor_, Uzushio whispers in his ear, a breath of sea-wind in the humid bustle of Konoha's streets. _You will find him, my child._

Naruto steps to the side, out of the path of the street traffic, and leans back against the wall, tilting his head back and closing his eyes. Uzushio doesn't talk to him often—she's too big, too vast, and there's very little about her that's 'human', so she has a hard time understanding her people regardless of how she loves them. But when she speaks, he listens. He answers, because she is everything, she is _his_ in the same way he is hers, in the same way that every living soul in the city and the city itself is his to care for. She is every person within the walls and every soul that has ever lived within their borders, and Naruto is all but overwhelmed with adoration for her every time he takes a breath.

_I will. You know I will_, he promises silently, the same way he once promised to come back to her, when she called. And he always keeps his promises, doesn't he? He's still trying to keep the one he made to Mito, but—

Soon. Soon, he'll be able to fulfil that. Two weeks, maybe, or three, but very soon.

Uzumaki Anzu and her husband Ken had brought him a handful of age-worn papers, their first hour in the city. They had been traveling merchants in Earth Country once, before Uzushio's call reached them, and both of them were hard and weathered, but far from unkind. Nevertheless Anzu's hands
had shaken slightly, when she had put the papers down before him on the desk, and surely it must have made a ridiculous picture to anyone outside, two experienced and deadly shinobi-trained travelers bowing before a boy of just thirteen.

"Uzumaki Yui was my third cousin," Anzu had said evenly. "She never made it out of Uzushio before it fell, but my family found her nephew wandering on the coast of Wave when they went looking for survivors. He had—" She had faltered, and Naruto had wanted to look away, but fought the urge. Anzu had shaken her head, sharp and angry, and finished, "He had cut out his own tongue." She'd met Naruto's eyes, grim and pale but steady, and gestured to the papers. "There was a seal on it. My mother was never good with creating seals, but she was a fair hand at copying them, even from such a small original. Reisi never told them what happened, but they managed to draw their own conclusions, and kept those documents just in case. I thought it best to pass them on."

Kabuto had recognized that seal, walking into Naruto's office one day as he studied it. Orochimaru had known it, too, when Naruto had managed to gather his courage and tamp down his anger enough to approach the Sannin. Danzo, they both had said, unhesitating, unwavering, even without knowing any of the context. Traitor, they'd said, together and apart, and Naruto had never thought of it before that, had never considered what could drive an incredibly powerful jounin and a very skilled spy away from the village that raised them, but—

There's little—very, very little—that Naruto hates more than manipulation. To twist someone's mind and turn them against friends, to poke and prod and nudge until something in the psyche is irrevocably shattered—that's horrid, dishonorable, and he loathes it. Orochimaru is an ally now, Kabuto a true and trusted friend, and while Naruto has...reservations about some of Orochimaru's actions in the past, he knows without conceit that Uzushio is a valuable ally, and the Snake Sage respects that enough—respects what Uzushio and its seals and strength can do for him enough—that he's willing to at least make a few concessions in the name of morality and keeping the Uzukage placated. And for the friendship with Oto, for Suigetsu and Kimimaro and Kidomaru and the way that Kabuto very clearly loves Orochimaru as one of the few constants in his life—for that, Naruto is willing to extend a hand, both as Uzukage and as himself.

For Kabuto and Orochimaru, too, Naruto is willing to take Danzo down.

A body settles against the wall beside him, shinobi-silent and smelling just faintly of paper, fresh grass, and honing oil. And before Naruto can do anything, say anything, a quiet voice murmurs, "You know, I've turned that last conversation over in my mind so many times I can recite it in my sleep. You...you were going to say 'I want them to acknowledge me. I want that even more than I want to become Ho...Kage'. Not Hikage."

Naruto opens his eyes slowly, every muscle loose but ready to move, not that he has any idea where to move to. If this is it, if his cover is blown—

He meets Iruka's steady gaze, takes a short breath, and murmurs, "I'm...sorry, Iruka-sensei." Because those eyes are ever so faintly wounded, pained even though he hides it well, and Naruto doesn't regret leaving. Uzushio needed him, his people needed him, and he honestly can't image what all of their lives would be like if he hadn't gone. He...regrets, but not enough to actually have regrets.

Something like satisfaction flickers through Iruka's eyes, satisfaction and faint unhappiness and joyful certainty, but he smiles cheerfully and says a little more loudly, "I've heard that you're interested in the history of Konoha, Youko-san. I teach at the Academy, so if you'd like to come back to my apartment, I can answer any questions you have."

Despite his years in a classroom, Iruka is still most definitely a shinobi, trained and tried. He knows misdirection as well as anyone. With a grin just hidden by his mask, Naruto dips his head and pushes
off the wall, remembering at the last moment not to cross his arms behind his head and instead tucking them into his sleeves. "That would be wonderful, Umino-san," he responds politely, and it's work to keep his voice even, between nerves and anticipation and sheer happiness that Iruka… missed him. He didn't exactly doubt, but confirmation is still…nice. Touching.

The walk is silent but for a few mostly inane bits of chatter, both of them mindful of the ANBU watchers in hiding around them. Naruto keeps his eyes on their surroundings, even as Iruka escorts him up the stairs to his apartment and lets him in with a smile, and then closes the door firmly behind them.

Silence, again, as Naruto turns to face his former teacher. Taking a breath, he glances at the windows—covered—and the walls—thick, because the building is old and sturdy—and lets the first bits of tension ease out of his shoulders. It's all right. This is Iruka, this is one of his very first precious people, and it's fine.

He reaches up, tugs the mask down to hang around his neck, and grins at the chuunin with all the warmth that's battering at the inside of his chest. "Hi, Iruka-sensei," he says cheerfully.

There's a long pause, and then Iruka laughs. He laughs and steps forward, pulling Naruto into a tight, rib-cracking hug as the bells in Naruto's hair jangle wildly with the sudden tug, and breathes out, "Oh, Naruto, I missed you so much." He pulls back just slightly, enough to reach up and scuff at Naruto's hair with a fond smile, and then adds, "Calling yourself Youko—didn't I tell you that you're not that demon fox?"

Naruto feels Kurama stir inside him, indignant, but waves the fox away and grins at his teacher. "He's not actually a demon," he points out. "And somebody was controlling him when he attacked Konoha. Kurama's not that bad." That gets him another pointed grumble, the emotional equivalent of an am too, but Naruto ignores his tenant with the ease of long practice.

Iruka hesitates, but before Naruto can even start to worry he's smiling and shaking his head, murmuring, "Of course you'd make friends with him, Naruto. What was I expecting?" He steps back, but only enough to drag Naruto over to the couch and pull him down. "Tell me," he orders. "What have you been doing for the last seven years, Naruto?"

It's Naruto's turn to hesitate, and with a faint sigh, he reaches up and pulls the ornaments from his hair, just to give his hands something to play with. "First, how did you figure it out?" he asks, forcing himself to be serious. Because if Iruka guessed… Though, granted, he has context that most people wouldn't.

That gets him an offended huff from the teacher, and Iruka crosses his arms over his chest. "Even if I was never much of a front-line soldier," he says with faintly wounded dignity, "I earned my rank, Naruto. I'm a good spy. You and Haku leave, with you slipping up and mentioning Uzushio before you go, and then years later a blond and a brunet arrive talking about their newly rebuilt village of Uzushio, one of them named Youko and wearing a mask that hides his face. Maybe someone else wouldn't have put it together, but I know you, Naruto. You're mimicking Kakashi with that getup, aren't you? It's a great prank, but—"

"Not a prank," Naruto cuts in, voice soft but ironclad. "Iruka-sensei, do you really think I'd fool so many of my precious people for a prank? It's serious. This is about why Uzushio fell almost thirty years ago—about doing whatever I can to keep it from happening again. It's dangerous, Iruka-sensei, and you can't tell anyone. Don't even think about it too heavily."

Iruka meets his eyes. Naruto feels off-kilter and tense and nervous, and some of it must show, because the teacher's gaze softens, eases a little, and he reaches out to pull Naruto into another tight
"You grew up, Naruto," he murmurs, sad and triumphant and regretful and more things that Naruto can't even begin to name. He just closes his eyes and buries his face in Iruka's shoulder, breathing in the familiar smells of Konoha and classrooms and family. "I'm so sorry that I didn't get to see it."

One breath, another, a third, and Naruto drags his composure around himself like so much armor, pulling back to grin at Iruka as best he can. Maybe it's a little watery, but it's bright and happy and he feels bright and happy, the ache in his chest gone and settled into something very like what he felt the first time he looked out over a whole Uzushio. "You'll just have to come visit, then," he offers. "Uzushio is standing again, and it's gorgeous, Iruka-sensei, you won't believe how gorgeous it is! I like to climb to the top of the hills over the village when the sun is setting, and it turns the ocean red and gold and the city glows. Gaara's the jounin commander, and Haku is my bodyguard, but Utakata and Kabuto always call him my babysitter. And—"

"Breathe, Naruto!" Iruka laughs, reaching out to tweak his nose the way no one's done in years. Haku and Gaara and Kabuto and Fū and all the rest—they take liberties, tease and poke and prod in their own ways, but none of them have ever quite managed to fill Iruka's spot as a slightly overbearing older brother. But that's fine, because Naruto never wanted them to, and Iruka himself it enough. Naruto grins at him, heart feeling a size too large for his chest, and Iruka smiles back, warm and fond and relieved, and scuffs a hand through long blond hair again.

"I'm glad," he says affectionately. "I'm so glad you're happy, Naruto."

Naruto remembers his words that night, has never been able to bring himself to put them out of mind regardless of how many years have passed. You should do whatever is going to make you happy, Naruto. Because even if the villagers acknowledge you, if you're not happy, it won't be enough. And more than anything, I want you to be strong and safe and happy, no matter what path you pick in the end.

He's picked his path, set his feet firmly on it and never wavered, because he's made promises. And of the many things that have changed over the last seven years, his nindo isn't one of them. I never go back on my word. That's my ninja way.

There are more promises now than ever before, his oaths as Uzukage, his oath to Mito, his promises to Uzushio, how he's sworn to find justice for the dead. His word given so many times over, and Naruto is going to honor each instance. Every last one, because that's what his precious people have taught him. That's his way, and no matter what else changes, that never, ever will.
Second Movement: Sonatina for the Sleepless, Stretto

Chapter Notes

Because some people have mentioned not wanting to see redeemed!Orochimaru, I’ll warn you now that he is my second-favorite Naruto character and will be…grey-ish here. Still self-serving, but in the vaguely-sort-of-helpful-to-the-good-guys way he is in (current) canon. There are characterization notes on how I see him up on my FFN profile (or my LiveJournal) if you're interested.

So this is either two days late or five days early, depending on how you want to spin it, but I have been fucking desperate to write this chapter, oh my god. For something that was started to satisfy my SasuNaru feels, this has taken a damned long time to work itself around to anywhere near that goal. Fuck, I need to learn to write better plots. *headdesk*

[Sonatina: A short or brief sonata.

Stretto: Pertaining to the fugue, the overlapping of the same theme or motif by two or more voices a few beats apart.]

‘You're going to do something reckless aren’t you,’ Kurama huffs. Despite the phrasing, it’s not actually a question.

Naruto rolls his eyes, adding one final line to the seal carved into the tree trunk in front of him. There are six more seals, six more trees set in a circle with Naruto’s seals on the side of the trunk facing out. After so many times going over this in his head—secret from Haku, from Gaara, from Utakata and anyone else who might feel the need to point out all of the risks even when Naruto has thought of every single one already—it was barely the work of ten minutes to set up the barrier. More of Saehara-sensei’s favored mood modifiers, combined with seals to affect the mind and redirect attention elsewhere. *Don’t look,* is the message they give. *Don’t look, don’t pause, there’s nothing to see.*

“Reckless implies that I haven’t considered all possible outcomes,” he points out, grateful for the lack of company that lets him answer aloud without feeling like a schizophrenic. “Come on, I even got Orochimaru to distract Ero-Sennin! That’s forward thinking, thank you.”

‘No, reckless implies that it’s a stupid plan with too many variables and dumb risks involved,’ Kurama counters. ‘And the Snake is and always will be a creep.’

‘Did you and Haku trade off on babysitting duty or something?’ Naruto grumbles, sliding through the barrier and reaching for the sealing scroll he keeps in his left sleeve. A single drop of blood and then a heavy wooden shaft settles in his hand, the butt capped with iron and the other end topped with forty centimeters of perfectly honed blade, the steel shining blue in the moonlight. Arashi’s naginata, Sāji, recovered from the ruins as they rebuilt, and Naruto welcomes it to his hand like an extension of his arm, sweeping it out in a wide circle and allowing himself one flamboyant spin over his head before he resettles his grip with a grin.

The naginata is considered a woman’s weapon, primarily, but Naruto—like Arashi—isn’t exactly a
towering specimen of masculine stature and strength. He’s honestly kind of short, and he’ll never have Sasuke or Kakashi’s reach. Quick and tricky and unpredictable are his biggest assets, and Sāji amplifies all of that. It fits his hand, fits his fighting style, keeps him at a distance so he can make use of his chakra reserves and hammer an opponent with jutsus, but also allows him to duck in close enough to use seals, which can be laid with skin contact.

Four long sweeps of the capped butt and a design is taking place on the packed earth, cleared of leaf-fall for this reason. It’s large, almost two meters across, but deceptively simple. Once Naruto activates it, it will start bleeding a specific type of chakra into the air—chakra tied to him, but in amounts just small enough that not even the Hyuuga Clan will notice it. There are ten days until the first of the month, ten days until the Chuunin Exams start, and that means he has seven days before it’s time to activate the transportation seals he carried here with him, allowing the four teams to pass through to Konoha.

Seven days—ten at the very most—to find evidence of what Danzo’s hiding and deliver it to Tsunade tied up with a big red bow.

Seven days. Of course he’s going to be reckless. But Haku is out of the line of fire, and everyone else vulnerable is still safely tucked away behind Uzushio’s nearly unbreakable barrier. He’s got room for recklessness, now, even if he hasn’t since he first became Uzukage.

A step back lets him take in the entirety of the design, the outer boundary complete. It’s done in broad strokes, thick twisting lines through the dirt, and with a satisfied nod Naruto flips Sāji over to use the long blade for the intricate detail work necessary for the interior.

‘Not to underestimate the old geezer, but don’t you think this is a bit…excessive?’ Kurama questions, gruff but interested. There’s a slight flare of chakra that means he’s looking through Naruto’s eyes, studying the design of the seal.

“There's no kill like overkill,” Naruto counters cheerfully, flickering through the lines needed for the output template and starting on the conversion matrix. There’s no hesitation, no pause—he’s had this all laid out in his head for weeks now. “Besides, Danzo has all of Root. I’ve got a grumpy demon fox, a couple of jutsus, and some seals. It’s always good to have other options.”

‘You make it sound like you actually think out plans beyond just attack relentlessly until it’s dead. Or, barring that, talk until it regrets its whole life and repents.’

“Don’t act like you’re not a part of this decision-making process, Kurama. If you don’t like my plans you’re more than capable of speaking up. And wasn’t it you egging me on last time we were on a mission?”

Kurama huffs haughtily. ‘I am a wise and noble spirit of power, taught by the Sage of Six Paths himself. I’ve got much better things to do with my time than critique your so-called plans, Fishcake.’

“Don’t call me Fishcake, bastard! At least I’m not scared of a girl.”

‘I’m sorry to be the one to break this to you, brat, but your mother is a monster. The fact that you aren’t scared of her, even her chakra impression, just means that it’s genetic. Or catching.’

“Kurama! Stop making my mother sound like some kind of disease!”

The feel of the chakra, tightly contained and tamped down as it is, is a nostalgic one, as familiar as his childhood. Jiraiya follows it, because that’s what he’s always done, follows it past the Hokage
Mountain and into the cool of the nighttime woods. There's a flicker ahead of him, cream-colored cloth half-covered by long black hair, pale skin in the moonlight, and Jiraiya picks up his pace until he’s nearly running through the darkened trees.

It’s not necessary, though. When he bursts into a clearing, one step away from calling up a toad and preparing for combat, he finds Orochimaru waiting. The Snake Sage is seated on a boulder in the faint half-light, no weapons or summons to be seen, and he looks almost…peaceful.

Jiraiya hasn’t seen him look peaceful in a very, very long time. Twisted or cunning or furious or murderous, yes, but never like this, not since well before he fled the village. Never at ease the way he is now. It’s…staggering.

“Jiraiya,” Orochimaru says softly, inclining his head as though it’s absolutely normal for them to run across each other just a mile from Konoha’s walls.

“…You’re a long way from Rice Country, Orochimaru,” Jiraiya says at length.

Orochimaru doesn’t move, doesn’t even rise though he would most certainly be at a disadvantage here if Jiraiya chose to attack. “I have information I wished to pass on to you, and I assumed it would be easier for you to believe me if I delivered it in person.”

Jiraiya thinks he is entirely entitled to the flatly skeptical look he levels at his former teammate.

In response, Orochimaru rolls his eyes in that supercilious, arrogant gesture that always drove Jiraiya nuts when they kids. He sighs, incredibly put-upon, and offers, “You’ve been tracking Akatsuki since I left, Jiraiya, but you’ve never gotten anywhere. You don’t even know the leader or where they’re based. But I have been…convinced that it would be beneficial if I were to share what I know.”

It’s funny that, for someone as quiet as Orochimaru always has been, Jiraiya’s never heard him use five words when twenty would do. With an eye-roll of his own, he takes four deliberate steps closer and says dubiously, “Oh really?”

Orochimaru looks at him for a long moment, golden eyes calculating, and then huffs grandly, like the dramatic bastard he is, shakes back one of his long sleeves, and offers Jiraiya his hand, palm up.

Jiraiya gives him a wary look, but takes another two steps forward.

It’s just a hand, slender and long-fingered and elegant, with the callouses that any shinobi worth their kunai has. The moonlight is bright enough for Jiraiya to pick out the faint discoloration of scars, and one scar in particular—a long, narrow slash from the center of Orochimaru’s palm that runs all the way up to the middle of his forearm, just missing the major veins in his wrist. That, too, is utterly familiar, a souvenir from one of their first missions as chuunin, but Jiraiya hasn’t actually seen it in years now. He narrows his eyes in suspicion, then glances up at Orochimaru with something akin to disbelief bubbling in his chest. Surely it’s not—

“My original body, yes,” Orochimaru says, because he’s a bastard and has always made a game of defying Jiraiya's expectations, good or bad. “There was…a lack of suitable hosts, last time I required one, and our darling Uzukage managed to get out of my minions that I had preserved this one. He stuffed me back in it, sealed my soul here, and…informed me of the error of my ways.” He withdraws his hand with a faint grimace. “The man is absolutely ridiculous—just as much as he was when we were children.”

Jiraiya’s knees feel suspiciously unsteady. He takes a deep breath and sinks to the ground, settling cross-legged and dragging a hand over his face. “…Arashi?” he asks after a pause.
Orochimaru arches one elegant brow at him. “He’s hardly gone to pains to hide it, I imagine. But yes, the Arashi you remember is currently in charge of Uzushio.” He hesitates, noticeable in that he never hesitates, and then says carefully, “I have…been reminded that my original goals are still within reach, and rather more…plausible than I had come to think.”

Holding a conversation with Orochimaru is and always has been an exercise in hearing things unsaid and reading between the lines. Jiraiya frowns, sorting through things. He knows Orochimaru’s original goals—he wanted to live to see his parents reincarnated. That fell by the wayside years ago, though, his hopes of predicting or identifying reincarnations lost to lack of concrete evidence, but—

But Uzumaki Arashi is still in charge of his village, even though the whole world thought him dead. But Orochimaru believes in reincarnation again, really believes in it if this apparent peace with himself is anything to go by, and there’s only one conclusion Jiraiya can draw from that.

He breathes out, long and slow, and resists the urge to pinch himself. This is just…surreal. “I’d accuse you of pulling my leg, but I don’t think even you have enough imagination for something like this. Damn.”

Orochimaru inclines his head, and if Jiraiya didn’t know better he’d say that there was a faint, wry smile tugging at one corner of his mouth—another reminder of their childhood, of simpler times. And maybe Jiraiya should be more doubtful, maybe he should take a step back and a step away, but the Orochimaru in front of him right now has lost the overtones of madness that he’s been carrying for decades. There’s no edge of manic anger, no thread of insanity in golden eyes, and while maybe it’s not alright, not even close—Sarutobi-sensei, he thinks, with a pang and a bite of furious, grudging hurt—it’s…better. Better than it has been in a long time.

Jiraiya can work with better.

“Right,” he says firmly, shaking off his thoughts and focusing on the man in front of him. “You said you had information about the Akatsuki?”

Orochimaru’s eyes seem to glow in the darkness as he slides off his boulder, settling on the ground across from Jiraiya. Moonlight catches on the planes of his face, the curve of one ear, glitters over the tomoe-shaped earring there and then slides like liquid silver across the uninterrupted darkness of his hair. “Yes,” he says, and that’s the Orochimaru Jiraiya remembers from missions as a child, as a teenager, before Dan and Nawaki’s deaths, Tsunade’s departure, and Sarutobi picking Minato as his successor broke some thread of sanity within him. Languid and deadly as a viper, fiercely focused even though he hides it behind a smirk and a slanted look. “Tell me, Jiraiya, what do you know about Uchiha Madara?”

Sasuke wakes to a sky already covered by encroaching clouds, low and heavy, and the taste of coming rain like quicksilver on the back of his tongue. The air is still and muggy, humid enough to leave him feeling irritable and miserable in equal measure. For a very long moment, he debates the merits of simply not leaving his bed until nightfall, shift at the Missions Assignment Desk be damned, but then he recalls that he’s still paired with Ino, and she will never let him get away with skipping out. Not only that, but she’ll hunt him down, drag him out into the street in his boxers, and proceed to gleefully torture him until he repents the great sin of abandoning her to an entire shift of mind-numbing boredom.

Sometimes, Sasuke thinks longingly of the days when her only goal in life was pleasing him.

With a sigh and a grimace, Sasuke gives in to the inevitable and levers himself out from underneath
the sweat-sticky sheet, tossing it back and stalking his way to the bathroom for a quick, cold shower. The rush of water is a small relief that’s over too soon, and he forgoes his usual uniform for a dark blue tank top under his jounin vest and his lightest pair of pants.

Damn it. He hates humidity.

Even coffee is too much heat to bear, and he putters around the kitchen for a moment, at a loss for what to do with the extra twenty minutes not making it gives him. Once Sasuke catches himself stuffing his head in the freezer for the third time, though, he reluctantly skulks out of his apartment, joining the morning crowd on the streets. His bare ANBU tattoo gets him a few extra looks, as does the tank top, but Sasuke ignores the gawkers with the ease of long practice as he heads for the Yamanaka flower shop.

He’s halfway there when a peal of gut-wrenchingly familiar laughter freezes him in his tracks.

Sasuke very nearly staggers, hearing that sound. It’s like his legs have been cut out from under him, like gravity has suddenly spun away beneath his feet and all that’s left is a tearing, aching recognition that goes soul-deep and then boils upwards to his heart. Because for nearly seven years now he’s been listening for that exact same laugh everywhere, on every mission and in every place he’s ever visited. It’s haunted him more than Itachi’s last words that night, more than his brother’s shadow in the village. More than standing before the shrine ever has, because it’s Naruto and how can it not?

He jerks around towards the source of the sound, heart beating a double-time tattoo in his chest as he scans the street for spiky blond hair and tanned skin and—

There, a flash of gold, but it’s about three shades too pale, the skin three shades too dark, and how in the name of all things sacred does Youko have Naruto’s laugh?

_Dreaming_, Sasuke tells himself sharply. _You’re dreaming._ _Or you’ve gone insane. It can’t_—

But then it comes again, bright and loud and freer than anything else could ever be, just the way Sasuke remembers it, except that the one it’s coming from is Youko, and that’s impossible. Absolutely impossible, because Youko carries himself differently, doesn’t blurt out his thoughts or recklessly charge forward or grin naively at everything under the sun. He doesn’t scratch the back of his head in sheepish embarrassment when Sasuke arches a brow at him, or puff up in indignation under Tsunade’s skeptical eyes, doesn’t sling an arm around Sasuke’s shoulders in uncomplicated friendship the way no one else—

It’s not Naruto. But—

But he’s talking to Iruka. He’s talking to Iruka like they’re old friends, standing off to one side of the street and tucked back between two stores’ displays. Iruka is in uniform, like always, and Youko is sporting another short kimono, this time in a bright sea blue, but the blond is wearing it…differently. Just slightly, and it’s nothing Sasuke would have noticed without something else to draw his attention, but…he can’t help but be reminded of the time Sakura dragged him to a festival and Naruto tagged along. They had played games and relaxed—as much as Sasuke ever allowed himself to relax, then—and for a very, very brief handful of hours they had been children instead of shinobi.

Naruto had worn a kimono, clearly secondhand and even more clearly borrowed from Kiba, if the light covering of dog hair was any indication, and he’d looked…_easy_. Not like Sasuke would have expected him to look, given that it was his first time wearing formal clothes. The way he’d moved, the way he’d held himself, it had spoken of innate grace all too rarely seen. Economy of motion and an understanding of his own body that no genin had.
When he first arrived, Youko had carried himself rather like Kakashi, languid and at ease and carefree, but only on the surface. Beneath the façade had been tension and hesitation and wariness, just what Sasuke would have expected from a foreign nin approaching a power with whom their welcome was uncertain. Now, though…

Now Youko moves like Naruto did that night. Sasuke can see it in the flicker of his hands as he talks, the tilt of his head as he ostensibly grins up at the chuunin. He pinpoints it in the shift of his feet before he takes a step, the way a hand casually brushes the long blond hair—sun, Sasuke thinks, and feels like the world’s greatest fool for not seeing earlier. Sun and light reflecting off water and how much faster would that make a person’s skin dark? How much faster would that be at bleaching a person’s hair three shades lighter? How much of a change would that make after almost seven years of constant exposure?—and touches the back of his head, a shadow of the familiar motion Sasuke has sought in crowds time and again.

How much of Youko's careful, diplomatic poise was an act? How much was affected, just to further distance him from the rambunctious blond who disappeared? Who disappeared with Haku, and then returned with Yuki, and damn it all, but Sasuke is ANBU. He’s supposed to be smarter than this.

Another laugh, a tip of Youko's head, and—

Youko, Sasuke thinks, and the pieces are falling together—more than falling, they're flying into place like kunai hurled at a target. What was it he said, when Ino asked him about his name? Youko is a girl's name, among other things. Youko. Fox spirit. Kitsune. The Kyuubi no Kitsune. Gods damn it, the only way he could have been more blatant about it was if he actually called himself Fox.

He hadn’t even admitted to being an Uzumaki until his persona was firmly established in everyone’s mind. And Sasuke had fallen for it, had fallen for green eyes because he’d been so set on seeing blue, so set on finding Naruto that he hadn’t even realized that Naruto had waltzed into Konoha literally under his nose.

(That, at least, gets a brief flutter of smugness. Sasuke's still taller than him by a few good inches. Petty, perhaps, but ultimately all the more satisfying. Sasuke's never claimed to be overwhelmingly mature.)

The world spins, steadies, and Sasuke takes a breath.

Youko is Naruto. All that careful sidestepping in their conversation above the market, the ever-present mask—that was because Youko is Naruto.

His heart is very, very close to beating right out of his chest. It feels as fast as a hummingbird’s wings, but Sasuke is entirely steady, gravity returned, grounded by the sudden, staggering, overwhelming surge of elation. Joy and sweeping satisfaction and enough glee to practically choke him, all tied up and knotted together with the knowledge that this is Naruto.

Naruto, who has spent the last seven years building a village that at least five jinchuuriki call home. Who has another home that isn’t Konoha, but that matters so blindingly little right now that Sasuke can hardly even bring himself to think of it.

Because Naruto is here.

He wants to march over there, interrupt their conversation and place himself squarely in the center of Naruto's attention. Wants to grab Naruto by the collar of that deceptively neat kimono and punch him in the face, except that he’s too happy for a reaction like that. Wants to grab him by the collar and drag him close and—
Kiss him. Sasuke wants to kiss him, wants to grab him and never let him go, wants to shake him and hug him and hit him and just *touch him*. Because all Sasuke has wanted since that awful, hideous morning waking up in the hospital to *Naruto's gone* is for Naruto to come back, and he…

He has.

He *has*.

Heedless of the crowd around him, of the humidity, of *everything* beyond the brilliant blond, glowing with life and enthusiasm and standing just thirty feet away, Sasuke tips his head back to the sky and closes his eyes tightly, just for a moment. Just for a second, while he doesn’t know whether to grin or laugh or cry or rage, Sasuke looks away.

And then he looks back, because he turned his face away once and his world shattered.

Never again.
Second Movement: Reminiscence, Rubato

Chapter Notes

Yeah, this is tomorrow’s update, but my schedule is still screwy, and at this time tomorrow I'm going to be halfway to Heathrow. Hopefully I’ll be able to get back to regular Tuesday posts next week, but no promises. RL is insane. :/

Also, my computer seems to be having seizures, so this was written on my phone, which thinks English is me being dumb and unable to spell. So, errors. You will find them. I apologize. orz

[Rubato: An important characteristic of the Romantic period. It is a style where the strict tempo is usually abandoned for a more emotional tone.]

Sasuke may not be the particular brand of genius that created a new style of clone at the age of twelve, but he is at least above average with Shadow Clones. It’s easy enough to leave a bunshin with Naruto—who is already being stalked by a whole ANBU squad, and likely won't notice one more body among the press, or will dismiss it if he does—and split off, heading deeper into the village.

He’s reeling, but at the same time he’s…not. In fact, a good portion of him is steadier than he has been in nearly seven years. Over, he thinks, my search is over, and for all that he’s never wavered in his resolve it’s still absolutely astonishing that he’s succeeded. That he’s found Naruto.

Or, well, that Naruto has come back entirely of his own volition and with no influence from Sasuke at all, no matter how much that fucking stings, but it’s all the same in the end, right?

It’s fine. It doesn’t matter. There's no reason to think about that, and a thousand and one reasons to think about why. Why Naruto has chosen to come back this way, secret and surreptitious and hidden from absolutely everyone when the bright eleven-year-old who left was so very ready to declare himself, ready to do whatever it took for the recognition that should have been his by virtue of human, let alone a Konoha shinobi. And yes, Sasuke can still find it in himself to be bitter about that, because—

Because he remembers his father, remembers Itachi, who was the epitome of the perfect Uchiha, the perfect brother. And Sasuke, no matter how smart or skilled or advanced for his age, was never anywhere close to good enough. Never good enough to rival him, to earn their father’s attention, or anything more from the man than a few dismissive words. None of Sasuke’s family were perfect, not really, and though it took quite a lot of agonizing and soul-searching and forcing himself to face the actual memories rather than the idealized versions, Sasuke has come to accept that fact. Even if Itachi —

Breathe, Sasuke reminds himself, coming to an abrupt halt on the rooftop overlooking an apartment building’s entrance. Think. Naruto is here. He’s up to something, something he doesn’t want anyone to know about. Or he’s hiding from someone. Not Uzushio, because no one would fake that much attachment to a place just for a cover. So...

So he’s hiding from someone who’s probably in Konoha. It’s not a joke or a prank, not with so
much effort put into the disguise, the act, the careful distance, the claims of being old enough to
know Kakashi’s father.

Even if Uzushio is, as Sakura so helpfully informed him during their binge, nicknamed the Village of
Longevity, that’s still a fairly outlandish claim to make, and Sasuke files it away for future
consideration. Right now, the matter at hand is whoever Naruto is so wary of—and this is \textit{Naruto},
who charged the Demon Brothers without hesitation, who faced down \textit{Momochi Zabuza} on their
first mission out of the village, who has always been reckless beyond any boundaries of sense—and
how much of a threat they likely are to him.

Of Konoha now or not, Sasuke is not about to let \textit{any} harm come to Naruto. Not unless Sasuke is the
one doing the harming, and he’s still divided on whether punching or kissing the moron is more
appealing.

Possibly, he’s hiding his identity because the people of Konoha are still pretty much collectively
brain-dead assholes and he’s the Kyuubi jinchuuriki, but Sasuke doesn’t think so. After all, Naruto
has never pandered to them and their prejudices before. His years away aren’t likely to have given
him reason to, especially not if he’s been living in a village with four other jinchuuriki. It’s equally
unlikely that it’s a \textit{personal} threat, because Sasuke knows Naruto—that would just send him out into
the open, somewhere between epic showdown, convenient distraction, and playing bait. What he
doesn’t know is Uzushio's political climate, its history in any sort of detail, and possible threats
against it.

So that’s back to square one again, then. Sasuke restrains a frustrated huff and rakes a hand through
his hair. Well, at least he knows what questions he’s going to ask when he decides to confront and/or
corner Naruto.

A flash of color from below draws Sasuke's attention, and he makes a chakra-assisted bound from
the roof to land lightly in front of his former genin teammate.

“Sakura,” he says, rising to his feet and fixing her with his best approximation of Ino’s killer puppy
eyes. (Not that he expects it to work, honestly. Reactions to that expression on his face vary from
laughter—Ino—to horror—Jiraiya—to deadpan disbelief—Shikamaru, and that was an \textit{accident},
Sasuke totally did not mean to give him that look no matter what Ino implies.) “Are you free? I need
a favor.”

Unlike in their genin days, when she would have fallen over herself to agree—or possibly used it as
leverage to get a date, because Sakura has always been unexpectedly devious—Sakura looks entirely
unimpressed. She gives him a flat stare, crossing her arms over her chest and arching one politely
incredulous brow in a manner most definitely learned from her teacher.

“She,” she says blandly.

That’s definitely not her encouraging tone of voice. Nevertheless, Sasuke is a shinobi of Konoha and
doesn’t back down even in the face of slim-to-none odds. He nods and forges on. “Can you cover
my shift at the Mission Assignment Desk? I need to do some digging.”

A week ago, Sakura would have refused out of hand, writing it off as another display of Sasuke's
obsession with finding Naruto. Now, with the truth of Uzushio undeniable and a solid lead in the
form of its ambassador—and gods, but Sasuke looks back on his conversation with Naruto in the
marketplace and just wants to laugh, because \textit{honestly}—she gives him a carefully considering look,
and then narrows her eyes.

“Sasuke,” she says warningly, “if this is like that time with the brothel in Hot Springs Country—”
“No,” Sasuke bites out, horrified by the very implication. “And why would you even bring that up? I thought we agreed never to—”

“Decreed, decreed is the word you’re looking for, Sasuke. You decreed that we were never going to talk about it again, and I distinctly remember not agreeing at any point in the conversation—”

“That’s not the point—”

“It is a totally real and valid point if I'm going to have to bail you out yet again, Sasuke. Neji would not look at me without snickering for three months. Ice Prince Neji. Do you know how absolutely humiliating that is? I swear, Kiba still sniggers whenever anyone so much as mentions beeswax, and if I'm going to be permanently mentally scarred from this ‘digging’ you're doing I think it’s absolutely fair that I know beforehand so I can brace myself.”

So maybe there’s a reason Sakura more than any of the Konoha Twelve is tired of Sasuke's endless searching for Naruto. Sasuke crosses his arms—not defensively, damn it—and meets her stare as evenly as he’s able while still preparing himself to dodge any incoming blows. Sakura has her hands on her hips and an expression promising divine retribution should he attempt to give her anything less than the full truth.

“In-village,” he promises, because he’s fairly certain Naruto isn’t going anywhere outside of it, not with Haku gone. “It’s just information gathering.”

“That’s what you said about the time with the mistress of the Bird Country Daimyo,” Sakura mutters, but Sasuke pretends momentarily deafness in her direction. It’s generally a fairly effective tactic.

“I no is the other jounin on shift,” he offers in a last-ditch attempt at persuasion.

Sakura holds out for another seven seconds before she gives in with a huff and a sharp roll of her eyes. “Great,” she mutters. “Awesome. We can bitch about you and your lack of life and social skills together.”

Sasuke winces, but, well, that’s more or less what he expected. If ever he missed their mindless fangirl devotion—

But then Sakura steps forward, raps her knuckles lightly against the side of his head with a fond smile, and mutters, “Well? Get going, jerk,” and Sasuke remembers exactly why he doesn’t. Because as they are now—

Yeah. It’s…pretty much perfect, no matter how much he might complain.

With a sharp “Hn,” to cover up whatever mushiness might be showing on his face, Sasuke jerks away, spins around, and leaps for the roofs again, ignoring his friend’s laughter rising behind him as he goes.

Tsunade watches the children play in the park, leaning against the wide windows of her office with her head tipped to rest against the cool smoothness of the glass. There's a group playing tag, and another huddled around a familiar figure in a chuunin vest. Sarutobi Konohamaru and his usual gaggle of devoted followers, and Tsunade can’t help but smile at the sight, recalling her trip back to Konoha with Naruto and his bright smile and his boasts about how he’d taken on a minion who called him “boss”. In the last near-seven years, Konohamaru has carried on his legacy, pranks and all.
(Although, Tsunade suspects, given her ANBU’s eternal aggravation at their failure to catch the culprit, Konohamaru isn’t the only one making mischief. Not that she’s going to say anything about that. It’s always good to keep them on their toes.)

Tsunade loves Konoha, loves it dearly even as she resents it fiercely. It’s her home, but it’s also a reminder of every loss she’s ever suffered, from her parents to Nawaki right up to Naruto just when she finally had hope of her curse being broken. And maybe Naruto isn’t dead, maybe he’s simply gone the way Sasuke so fervently believes, but Tsunade…misses him. Misses the little boy who mastered the Rasengan in a handful of days, mastered it and went beyond that until he could meet Orochimaru in a fight and give even the Snake Sage pause. Misses his optimism and his smile and the way he looked at her, the way Nawaki did, the way she’s sure her and Dan’s children would have, had they ever been given the chance to have any.

And for all her professed cynicism and attempts to be entirely realistic, Tsunade can't help but image that Naruto is somewhere...kind right now. Somewhere that they love him, appreciate him the way none of Konoha's people never managed beyond a sparse handful. She imagines a family for him, friends, a home, and it makes her smile to think of it. It’s...good.

A sharp rap on the door pulls her from her thoughts, and she glances up with a curious, “Enter.” It’s already getting late, the sun descending behind the thick blanket of clouds, and she knows there are no more meetings scheduled. She doesn’t even have any paperwork left, thanks in part to Shizune helping her blaze through the last few stacks. They’re both ready for a night off, after all.

There’s a pause, a hesitation, and then Jiraiya steps through the door. That alone makes Tsunade arch a brow and push away from the glass, because she can't remember the last time Jiraiya actually used a door rather than the window. He looks tired, too, exhausted but also tense, nerves humming with tension as he strides over to the desk, his geta clacking loudly in the silent room. No bruises that she can see, no shortened movements that speak of pain, but—

“Jiraiya?” she asks, and her voice is Hokage-sharp, because it’s clear this is her top jounin, her spymaster, rather than her teammate and childhood friend.

Jiraiya gives her a faint, wan smile, but doesn’t relax, doesn’t unbend even though he’d usually be sprawled all over the chair by now. “Tsunade,” he returns. “I’m...going to be out of the village for a few days.”

They're coming up on Konoha's first hosting of the Chuunin Exams since the disastrous attempted invasion seven years ago. Konoha is strong, true, but so are the other nations, and with the world’s current lack of outright warfare all the stops are going to be pulled for this event. It’s a mostly-harmless way to work out some rivalries, after all, and a perfect platform for Kage grandstanding. Tsunade needs all of her jounin present, and is just opening her mouth to remind Jiraiya of this when he raises a hand to stop her, shaking his head.

“It’s about Akatsuki,” he says, and she stays silent. “This morning I met with a contact who managed to infiltrate their base. With his information, there's enough to make a first move, and since their attention will be elsewhere at the moment, I need to take the chance.”

With a soft sigh, Tsunade returns to her chair, sinking into the comfortable-but-not-comfortable-enough seat and giving Jiraiya her full attention as she steeps her fingers in front of her. “It’s not that simple,” she objects. “Jiraiya, we’re pushed to the edge of our manpower as it is, between preparing for the Exams and running routine missions. I can't afford to send another jounin with you, and it would be a death sentence to ask a chuunin to go, even one of the elites. And you're not going alone—that’s suicide.”
It is…not surprising that Jiraiya doesn’t even look fazed. She’s known him since they were both brats, and Jiraiya has never, ever been accommodating to the idea of backup. He just waves a hand, brushing off the notion and offering her a grin that shouldn’t be nearly as carefree as it is. “Not to worry, hime, my informant’s coming with me.”

As a shinobi, as a Kage, Tsunade knows very well what type of people usually end up selling information—especially valuable, sensitive, dangerous information like this—to the Hidden Villages, and they’re generally either desperate for money or angling for something. On top of that, there are always even odds that such information is wrong, or deliberately false, or being supplied by the subject to maneuver Konoha into a trap. But, no matter how well Tsunade knows this, Jiraiya knows it even more, and she can see the determination written into every line of his features.

She wonders, sometimes, how her life would be different if Jiraiya had only a normal amount of stubbornness, rather than the unearthly amount he’s apparently been gifted with.

“How do you trust them?” Tsunade asks evenly, and that’s the million-ryo question, isn’t it? It’s also one that, in the shinobi world, can rarely be answered with yes. “Jiraiya, you’re going to be taking on the Akatsuki. Do you trust this informant to have your back even in that situation?”

Jiraiya pauses, turning the matter over in his mind. Part of Tsunade is glad that he’s thinking it over, but another part is deeply worried that he isn’t able to answer immediately.

At length, Jiraiya smiles. Just faintly, and with something held back, but…he smiles. It’s warm and happy and enthusiastic, and Tsunade hasn’t seen its like in years. Not since Naruto completed and perfected the Rasengan and then vanished. “Yeah,” he says, meeting her eyes squarely. “I can trust him. And besides, I wouldn’t want anyone else on this mission, hime. Stealth is going to get us a lot further here than busting down the front door. Even I’m not reckless enough to go after the entire organization head-on. We’ll slip in through a side door he knows while they’re all in the base, take out as many as we can before they raise the alarm, and then get the hell out of there before they can retaliate. These are all S-class nin, but together and with enough planning, I think we can outmaneuver them.”

An informant who has been inside the Akatsuki headquarters, who is powerful enough that Jiraiya feels confident going after eight impossibly strong and ruthless shinobi with him, whom Jiraiya trusts but not blindly, whose name he won’t tell her—really, there aren’t many people that could be, and Tsunade bites her lip in tightly contained worry. But for all of Orochimaru’s evil, despite everything he’s done, Tsunade can still read him. Their encounter seven years ago, when he offered to bring Dan and Nawaki back—that was honest. And in him, Tsunade had seen something of the young boy terrified and furious in the face of loss, who wanted to make everyone around him immortal so that he’d never have to go through such a thing again.

People—herself included—always forget that underneath the monster there’s a man. A shinobi who fought in two wars and was once one of Konoha’s greatest weapons. They treated him like it, too, treated all of the Sannin like that, and though Tsunade had Dan to distract her, though Jiraiya had the Ame orphans and then Minato’s team, Orochimaru—so very distant and reserved, so smart that he was on an entirely different level—Orochimaru had no one. Partly by his own choice, certainly, but also because he was terrifying and cold and so closely affiliated with his snakes that no one wanted to get close. And so no one did.

She hates him, yes. He killed Sarutobi and tried to destroy Konoha. He experimented on people and killed innocents and tried to play god. But she loves him too, loves the boy he was and the man he became, the friend and confidant and surrogate brother she lost so long ago.

But…perhaps he’s not lost entirely, or at least not anymore.
There's a part of Tsunade—the wild, reckless, headstrong part that let her survive on a team with two of the greatest shinobi Konoha ever produced, let her survive and thrive and come into her own beside them—that wants to stand up and leave with Jiraiya, head off to wherever the Akatsuki are hiding positioned firmly between Jiraiya and Orochimaru, just the way she’s supposed to be. To leave all of her responsibilities and duties and the low-level ache that Konoha brings with it and just... go. Re-forge her team, her family, from the ashes it’s long since become. Surely, in the face of the Three Sannin, not even Akatsuki will stand a chance. Surely, together—like they always were meant to be—there’s not a single obstacle that can stand before them.

She’s the Hokage, though. Her face is carved into the mountain, looking down on the village that’s hers to protect, and if she’s ever been anything, Tsunade is loyal. All her life she’s been loyal to her ideals, peace and justice and salvation even if she has to fight and kill for them. For thirty years she’s been loyal to Dan’s memory, to the love they shared. For seven years she’s been loyal to her village as only its figurehead can be, and she can't abandon that.

Moreover, Shizune and Sakura would probably hunt her down and drag her back by her hair.

With a soft, resigned, partially amused huff, Tsunade ruffles through a cabinet for a mission form, fills out the necessary details entirely by rote, and passes it off to Jiraiya. But when he tries to take it, she grips it tighter and makes him look at her squarely. “Just... be safe,” she pleads. “Both of you.”

Surprise flits over his lined face for a brief moment before it settles into a warm, affectionate understanding. “Of course,” he answers with a grin. “We’ll be back before you know it, hime.”

It’s what he used to say, back when they were children. He and Orochimaru both, fielding her worry with smiles and easy promises, coming home a thousand shades of battered but still going out again before they even healed entirely. Really, and people wonder why she’s such a good medic-nin. It’s solely because she had such excessive amounts of practice growing up.

With a sigh, Tsunade relinquishes the paper, watching Jiraiya scribble out the rest of the information, and then accepts it back and files it away. “Good luck,” she says, trying for a smile of her own. It’s out of practice, this particular shade of worried-but-hopeful-and-mostly-resigned, the same way she’s out of practice of thinking of Jiraiya-and-Orochimaru the way they used to be, brawn and brains, brashness and cunning, a team rather than mortal enemies.

Jiraiya tosses her a salute and a cheeky wink before he’s gone again, striding back out the doors and away into the quickly fading light.
Second Movement: Two-Tone Rendezvous

[Tone: The intonation, pitch, and modulation of a composition expressing the meaning, feeling, or attitude of the music.]

“Airi, tighten it up! I may not be a kenjutsu expert but even I can tell when you're getting sloppy! Yuriko, stop wimping out halfway and follow through! Don’t hesitate! Kenshin, are you a shinobi or a wallflower? Stop daydreaming, get in there, and help your teammates!”

Gaara remembers, if only vaguely, a time when Fū’s default volume was not set on ‘roar’. When she had first arrived, dragged into Uzushio only somewhat reluctantly by Naruto himself, she’d been bright and free-spirited and warily enthusiastic, but still…manageable. Mostly.

(In all honesty, she had taken to the freedom of Uzushio like a fish to water. Gaara is of the opinion that she has taken to it a little too well. After all, she and Naruto get on like a house on fire—with massive destruction, many traumatized bystanders, and equal opportunity for excruciating death or eternal glory.

They're still never allowed to go on missions together ever again.)

Then Naruto had presented Fū to her genin team, and ‘manageable’ had gone out the window twenty seconds into team introductions. Fū has adapted, a full year after opening her mouth to greet her little squirts and being instantly drowned out by three very exuberant and exceedingly talkative eleven-year-olds. Now, instead of bubbling, she bellows.

Gaara’s kunoichi genin, Aki, whirls past him, with Fū’s kenjutsu expert, Airi, right on her heels. Both girls are spitting curses, and as Airi lunges with her long, black-painted tachi, Aki dives out of the way, nearly rolling into Gaara’s legs before she gets far enough out of range to leap to safety. Gaara, well used to his student’s single-mindedness in a fight, simply rolls his eyes, sets his feet, and says just slightly louder than his normal volume, “Aki, watch your surroundings.”

“Sorry, sensei!” she calls back, though her grin is entirely unrepentant as she hurtles towards the tall rocks rising to their left.

Fū’s remaining genin are facing off against Gaara’s male students, both pairs putting on a decent show of teamwork, and Gaara feels safe enough to step back for the moment, settling beside a piece of twisted driftwood at the edge of the sand. Fū joins him after a second, throwing herself down in the sand and crossing her legs. She’s smiling, bright and warm, and Gaara looks at her for several heartbeats before he turns his face away.

“They’re doing well,” she says, and there's a sweet sort of contentment in her voice. “I…When Naruto told me I was going to be a jounin sensei, I have to admit I thought he’d gone insane. Well, more insane. But they're doing well. That’s pretty cool, don’t you think?”

Fū is a jinchuuriki just as Gaara is. Their pasts are similar, their burdens are the same. Never, ever before coming here, before meeting Naruto, would Gaara have thought that could be said of anyone with any measure of truth. But now—now he can't imagine having to do without it. Can't imagine having to go back to the way he was before, the life he lived then.

“Naruto is…always surprising,” he allows after a beat. “But usually correct.”

She laughs, reading between the lines to the ‘I felt the same way’ that Gaara doesn’t say. “Yeah,” she agrees, lifting her face to the sea-wind and taking a deep breath of salt air. “He’s a crazy, tricky
bastard, but that’s why we love him.” There’s a pause, and then she huffs and leans back against the log, stretching her legs out in front of her and crossing her arms over her chest. “Damn it, but I can't wait until we head out. Six days is too long. Naruto's probably having all kinds of fun kicking the hornet’s nest over there.”

Privately, Gaara agrees, and has to wonder just how much of Konoha will still be standing when they arrive.

“OI, KENSHIN, KEEP YOUR EYES OFF THE BUTTERFLY AND ON YOUR OPPONENT! FOCUS, DAMN IT!”

Gaara allows himself the faintest of smiles as Fū leaps to her feet, fuming, and stalks towards her genin, who go pale rather like an angry hurricane is bearing down on them instead of a petite kunoichi. Even Gaara’s team is inching backwards, and he gladly leaves them to Fū’s tender mercies, turning away to look out over the ocean as it rolls across the shore. The tide is coming in, and further out, just within the boundaries of Uzushio's perimeter barrier, a pair of fishing boats is being guarded by one of the chuunin teams. Despite the strength of the seals protecting the city, no one is taking chances with the Kiri ship still circling.

There’s a glint in the sky, a luminescent shine, and what looks like a soap bubble descends towards the beach, shattering several yards above the sand and revealing Utakata. The man lands neatly, barely stirring the sand beneath him, and then strides towards Gaara. His customary serene expression is shaded towards grim, entirely unusual, and Gaara frowns as he rises to his feet.

“Utakata,” he says expectantly.

Utakata inclines his head, then withdraws a message scroll from the sleeve of his yukata. “The falcon you sent to Naruto has returned,” he answers. “I thought it best to notify you immediately.”

His eyes narrowing in suspicion, Gaara accepts the missive and unrolls it, not at all comforted to see Haku's sharp, precise penmanship rather than Naruto's absentminded scrawl. The words are no comfort either, making his frown deepen and his fingers tighten on the paper. This…could be very bad indeed.

“Naruto sent Haku back,” he says flatly, when he realizes that Utakata is still watching him closely. The alone is only implied, but biting nevertheless. “He will reach the transportation seal at the border before ten, and asks that we be ready to bring him through.” A quick check of the sun shows that it’s just about time already—training has taken longer than he expected. Or maybe not, given Fū’s involvement. She is…distracting.

But this—Naruto, in Konoha, facing down Danzo, without support—that’s even worse.

Gaara has great respect for Naruto's strength. Naruto is not even nineteen yet and has rebuilt an entire Hidden Village, earned a title most ninja work their entire lives towards but never reach, gained allies in four of the world’s most powerful shinobi, forged ties with the Raikage’s little brother and top kunoichi and the Sannin Orochimaru, recalled a scattered people, and mastered his own not-inconsiderable power. Regardless of his past life, regardless of his memories, what he’s already done in his short existence is more than worthy of praise.

But Naruto is also a fool when faced with threats to those he cares about, and Konoha, for all its faults, holds all of those Naruto grew up with, fought alongside for the first twelve years of his life. He cares for them, and that will make him reckless.

Danzo is a dangerous enemy. If Naruto’s not very, very careful, it will make him dead.
The delicate paper tears beneath his curling fingers, and Gaara takes a slow, careful breath, feeling his sand stir restlessly around him. As soon as he’s sure of his control, he looks up to meet Utakata’s gaze and nods once. “Fū is best with the seals, after Naruto,” he says. “I will bring her. Would you escort our teams back to the village?”

“Of course.” Utakata nods in return, then steps away, graceful and deft on the uneven ground, to where Fū is directing drills. She grins at him as he inclines his head to speak with her, then waves cheerfully and bounds away, back towards Gaara.

“You can open the connection?” Gaara asks, even as he calls up his sand and lets it swirl and harden beneath their feet.

Fū sniffs, lifting her nose in the air like she’s offended, though Gaara can see the smile she’s hiding. “Are you kidding? I’ve been stuck in the village for the last three months, thanks to the squirts and those maniacs running around the mainland. I have so much extra chakra right now I’m surprised it’s not coming out my ears, and Chōmei is super restless. We can do it.”

Gaara doesn’t question her conviction, because she’s very like Naruto in that regard—or, rather, she’s some mystifying blend of Naruto and himself, boundless energy and cheer, but tempered by a jaded edge to her interactions with others and the mercilessness of a soul entirely used to being set alone against humanity.

“Naruto wants us to avoid Akatsuki for now,” is all he says. “Any fight we go into with them must be on our own terms.”

Fū makes a face, dropping down to sit cross-legged by Gaara’s feet on the moving disc. “I was there for that lecture, too,” she reminds him, running her fingers through her bright green hair. “From Naruto and Roushi.”

Roushi had been…unhappy, to learn of Han’s fate, suffered mere weeks before Naruto and Haku had arrived seeking him. Han and Yagura are, so far, the only jinchuuriki that Akatsuki have managed to take, thanks to Orochimaru’s warnings and Kabuto’s knowledge of their movements, but the organization is still very far from giving up. They’ve continued looking, and even though Uzushio’s jinchuuriki still take missions, still act like the normal ninja that Uzushio lets them be, they’re wary. None of them seek death. Not like that, not when they’ve finally found a place to call home without hesitation.

It could be far worse, though. Gaara, Haku, and Naruto had gone together, seeking Fū, and found her on the run from one of Akatsuki’s pairs. Kakuzu and Hidan, Gaara remembers they were called. Against three furious jinchuuriki with a fair measure of control and an overprotective Hyoton user, they had lasted thirty minutes, if that. Quite clearly, their immortality was overrated.

The shinobi watching the wall wave as they pass over, and Fū waves back cheerfully, then leans back on her hands and smiles, surveying the city as it passes beneath them. Under the noon sun, the red roof tiles and golden-brown streets seems to glow, the white stone of the buildings a warm, bright contrast. There are people everywhere, civilians in bright robes and shinobi mixed in and around them, each sporting a headband with Uzushio’s spiral. The midsummer air is warm, a breeze from the ocean just enough to keep it from being sweltering, and the smell of cooking food wafts up from the food stalls and homes. Gaara looks at it all, takes it in, and feels…content.

This is home.

The Administrative Center rises before them, the tallest building in Uzushio apart from the watchtowers on the wall, and Gaara guides them down, his disc of sand settling on the ground and
then dispersing, sliding back into his gourd. Fū hops up with a lithe stretch and immediately makes her way to the darkly drawn seal in the center of the courtyard as Gaara follows at a careful distance. The seal is incredibly complex, Naruto's work and developed over the course of two lifetimes. It's large too, ten feet across, with every inch of it detailed. So much chakra is needed just to activate it that only a jinchuuriki can use it and survive.

But Uzushio, unlike every other nation, has an excess of jinchuuriki and feels no need to constrain itself to everyone else’s limits.

Letting out a slow breath, Fū closes her eyes and calls up her chakra, letting it fill their air like the rattling hum of dragonfly wings at dusk. A kunai slides across her palm, deep red welling behind it, and she slaps a hand down on the outer rim of the seal, sending bright light racing over the lines until the entire array is luminescent. Gaara narrows his eyes, trying to see through the glare, and just manages to make out a figure in the midst of it. A bare second later, Haku is striding out of the seal, visor pushed up in his hair and face set in decidedly neutral lines, though there's a glitter of something like helpless frustration in his eyes.

Gaara knows the feeling very well, where Naruto is concerned.

“Gaara,” Haku says politely. “I would like it noted that this was not my idea.”

Despite himself, Gaara snorts. He really hadn’t thought so.

A small, reluctant smile pulls at Haku's mouth as some of the tension eases from his frame. He turns his attention away, offering Fū a polite nod and a hand to help her to her feet. She ignores it with a scoff, straightening and brushing of her skirt haughtily.

“Good to see you back in one piece, Frosty,” she says with a grin. “It was nice and toasty without you here to bring down the temperature, you know. So toasty that Kiri decided to take advantage of it and pay us a visit.”

Haku rolls his eyes at her, if only faintly. “Fū,” he returns, longsuffering, and then glances back at Gaara. “I take it the Kiri ship is still present?”

“Yes.” Gaara crosses his arms over his chest, fighting a frown. The shinobi aboard haven’t made any move so far, not even so much as attempting to breach the barrier. If he were inclined to doubt Utakata’s claim, he’d almost be convinced that the former Kiri nin was wrong.

But then, Utakata is clever and observant and, more importantly, Kiri trained, and Gaara trusts him. “You have leave to take a diplomatic team to confront them,” he informs Haku, knowing full well that whatever team Haku assembles will likely be geared far less towards diplomacy and more towards a show of force. “People are...restless. It would be best to mobilize as soon as possible.”

Haku's mouth tightens at that, his unhappiness with the situation clear. “I had hoped,” he says with deceptive lightness, even as he checks his senbon pouches, “that Terumi Mei would prove herself cut from a different cloth than Yagura, especially without Tobi’s influence. How disappointing.”

Gaara considers reminding him that they have no idea as to Kiri's motives here. But Haku is angry at having to leave Naruto alone to face down a dangerous enemy in a foreign village—not that Gaara is much happier—and the words will likely fall on deaf ears. As Gaara isn’t one to waste words that might be better spent elsewhere, he simply inclines his head, conceding the point.

“Do you still have enough chakra to be a part of the team?” Haku asks Fū, studying her closely for traces of chakra exhaustion.
The girl huffs and rolls her eyes at the hint of mothering, though her grin is bordering on bloodthirsty. “What do you take me for, Frosty? Just try leaving me behind.”

Haku nods, satisfaction settling just beneath his kind, placid mask, the very one that everyone in Uzushio has long learned not to take at face value. Haku is polite and careful and compassionate right up until he plants an ice needle in the enemy’s throat, and sometimes even after that. He gives nothing away unless he has to, moves like a ghost, and never seeks glory in a fight. Gaara is…wary of him, if only vaguely, because after the way he was raised Haku has only the most abstract concept of village. Naruto is his home, and Naruto alone. He's loyal to all of them, to every person in Uzushio, but though Naruto will never, ever ask it of him, Naruto is the one he would kill for.

And this—protecting the village, keeping Uzushio's people safe—this is for Naruto.

Gaara understands the sentiment entirely.

Danzo is a goddamn paranoid bastard.

Naruto swears under his breath, flattening himself against the trunk of a tree, deep in the shadows, as an entire squad of Root shinobi dart past. Twenty false trails, thirty tries at misdirection to lead him to the wrong conclusion, two dozen guards on an innocuous little research station a league outside Konoha, but he got around them all. He did it, and the files he needed, the proof that Danzo has had dealings with everyone from Hanzō to Orochimaru to the shadowy leader of the Akatsuki, is all safely stored away in one of Naruto's seals. Years’ worth of experimentation, dozens of shinobi conditioned to serve Danzo alone, shadowy missions from assassinations to retrievals—it’s all here.

He’s a thorough bastard too, at least. Meticulous in his record-keeping, and it’s a relief the way few things have been. Naruto had been afraid that there wouldn’t be records, that there would only be a few shady files that didn’t mean much of anything, despite all of Orochimaru’s insistence to the contrary. But Danzo thinks he’s the village’s greatest defender, thinks he’s doing the right thing, the best thing as far as Konoha is concerned, and despite the fact that he operates in shadow there’s a part of him—the part that looked to Sarutobi as a rival, that has tried for years to be named Hokage—that insists that he’s a hero.

It’s all documented. Right from the beginning, all of Root’s missions and deeds, even their assassination attempt on the Sandaime and the attempt to maneuver Ame into a war against Iwa.

Right up to Danzo's deals with Kiri, information on Uzushio's forces and defenses in return for its destruction.

It makes Naruto sick, makes his stomach feel like it’s filled with poisonous bugs, crawling and aching. So much death, so many lives ruined, and for what? Why? To keep Konoha strong? But it’s always been the strongest shinobi village, has never lost a war or even a major battle. To keep the people safe? But how many of Konoha's own citizens would Danzo have sacrificed in the name of that? Would he have been satisfied and content to rule over an empty village?

Grinding his teeth and keeping a stranglehold on the angry red chakra that wants to escape him, Naruto chances a quick look at his surroundings and darts out of hiding, moving as fast as he can while still maintaining some level of stealth. He got into the base undetected, managed to gather all the files he needed and leave copies that will vanish in a few hours in their place, but on the way out he’d been spotted. One guard off the usual rotation, one moment of attention where it shouldn’t have been, and all of his care had been for nothing.
But that doesn’t matter. He’s not going to get caught. Not now. Not like this, when he’s so close to finally winning.

He is Uzushio's Storm God, has had two lives to build his skills and hone his power. If he wanted to, Naruto has little doubt that he could walk bare-faced into Danzo’s home and kill him, just like that. No matter how many Root guards the man surrounds himself with, Naruto is fast and strong and has so very much anger and bottled rage that it would be easy.

But that’s not revenge, that’s *vengeance*. What Naruto wants is *justice*. He wants people to know who destroyed his village, and *why*. He wants them to look at Danzo and see the faces of hundreds of civilians, hundreds of shinobi killed because of one man. One man and his quest for power, for himself regardless of how he’s claimed it’s for Konoha. Innocents dead at *his* hand, people twisted and broken and pulled apart for his sick aims. Naruto wants everyone to know.

After that Tsunade can kill Danzo. After that, Naruto won’t care. A waste of life, he thinks with some regret, because Danzo could have been *great*, but that’s…not enough.

There are some lines that can’t be crossed, and Danzo has crossed all of them, again and again.

No matter how much mercy there is in him, this man at least Naruto cannot forgive.

There’s a cry from behind him, an alert, and Naruto curses under his breath, flipping over mid-leap to catch a kunai aimed at his back and then return it with interest. One of his pursuers falls, but Naruto doesn’t rest on his laurels, palming a handful of senbon and darting between the remaining two. The long needles drive cleanly through flesh, not even drawing blood as the two shinobi fall into unconsciousness like their strings have been cut, and Naruto leaps away, taking to the trees again. He can feel more of them around him, the distracting buzz of their silencing seals like multiple burrs against his skin, but they haven’t seen him yet, haven’t found him, and—

A hand in the darkness, grabbing him by the shoulder and wrenching him around before he can react. Naruto slams into a tree trunk hard enough to make his teeth rattle, and is already lunging to drive a senbon into delicate vitals when his attacker grabs his wrists in both hands and forces his fingers open, pinning him bodily with his greater height and weight. With a snarl, Naruto is just about to call up his chakra, regardless of how he’s refrained from using it—because water and wind aren’t common in Konoha, and it will be all too easy for people to piece together the puzzle if he starts dropping clues like that—when he realizes just who it is restraining him, and his heart skips a beat.

Sasuke, his dark eyes darker still in the shadows, his entire face a mask of pale fury as he snarls right back and slams Naruto up against the thick trunk. Another jarring shake and blond hair is cascading down from under its concealing hood and tumbling around Naruto’s face, leaving no question that Sasuke will realize he’s Youko if he hasn’t already, and this whole day can just *go die already,* Naruto is through with it—

“One reason,” Sasuke growls, and maybe it’s Naruto's imagination, but he thinks he can see sparks of electricity around Sasuke’s fingers where they’re gripping his wrists. “Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t call them over here and let them take you, you damned spy.”

Naruto's breath catches in his throat. This isn’t how he wanted this to go. This isn’t the situation he envisioned when he thought about Sasuke discovering his identity. But there’s no choice. He’s not going to hurt Sasuke—*can’t*, he *can’t*, they're friends or they were once, Sasuke has been *looking for him*, and to Naruto that *means something*—won’t hurt him in order to get away, but he also can't risk Sasuke making good on his threat and calling in Root.
“All right,” he says evenly, though his voice comes out hoarse and rough. “All right. You win. Just—let me?”

Sasuke's eyes narrow, but he lets go of Naruto's left hand. Slowly, making sure none of his movements can be construed as threatening, Naruto reaches up to his eyes and clumsily removes the colored contacts, blinking away the oddness of having them out as he carelessly lets them fall. It doesn’t matter anymore, regardless.

A breath, and he glances at Sasuke, who’s absolutely frozen, gaze fixed on his face. Another, and he hooks a finger in the top of his mask and slowly pulls it down, revealing six sharp whisker-marks that no one else in the world boasts.

Sasuke chokes on a breath, but his eyes flash with something like wild, savage satisfaction. The grip on Naruto's wrist tightens near to bruising, then goes slack. He makes some sound, something sharp and hurt and euphoric all at once and then lunges forward. Naruto flinches back, expecting a punch, a headbutt, a fireball to the face—anything, because Sasuke has been looking for him just shy of seven years, and surely, surely this is something to be furious about.

What he gets is lips on his, tongue and teeth and heat and want, a kiss so hard that if it was any harder one of them would be bleeding. It’s desire and satisfaction and fury and I missed you, where were you, why did you leave me all wrapped up and tangled together until Naruto has to accept them all at once, can't pick them apart any more than that.

_Sasuke is kissing me_, Naruto thinks dazedly, even as his knees go weak, even as Sasuke pins him to the tree and meshes their lips together in a breathless hot slide and _takes_, and Naruto leans back into him and _gives_. Even as he grabs Sasuke's shoulders and yanks him closer, and really, he’s _never_ thought of this before, never thought of doing this with _anyone_ even when he used to be obsessed with Sakura and dates.

But he _wants_, and that’s more surprising than anything. _He wants Sasuke_. Wants him so much it’s like an iron band around his lungs, like something burning in his chest. Like steel and silk and lightning overwhelming his senses all at once until there’s nothing left around him but the smell of spring rains and the faintest hint of ozone, nothing but Sasuke's mouth searing-hot and devastating over his, their bodies perfectly aligned.

He wants, and he takes, like there's nothing else to worry about in the entire world. And Sasuke kisses him, breathes him in like a drowning man as his hands slide over every inch of Naruto's skin that he can reach, gives up everything and takes it in turn because that's how it’s always been between them.

Naruto slides his fingers into Sasuke's soft hair, tips his head until their mouths fit together perfectly, and just that simply the kiss gentles, eases. A brush of lips, a slide of tongues that sends a small spark dancing down Naruto's spine, and he opens eyes he can't remember closing, breathes out long and shaky and slow as Sasuke reluctantly draws away. He doesn’t go far, just rests their foreheads together and looks right back at Naruto, eyes dark and fathomless.

But just this once, with his hands in Sasuke's hair and the taste of Sasuke's lips on his, Naruto is fairly sure he can read him anyways.

“You bastard,” he huffs, and if it comes out breathless and a little dazed, he thinks he can be forgiven. “You already knew.”

And Sasuke just grunts out a sharp, careless, “Hn,” but his eyes are laughing and his mouth is tilted up at the corners in a smile that is clearly at Naruto's expense.
The only option, obviously, is to kiss it away, and Naruto leans forward and does just that.
*headdesk* So I've just had The Week From Hell, Take II™, and this hasn't gotten quite as thorough an error-check as I normally give my work. Also, English is ridiculously hard right now. As is coherent thought. (My twin would like to point out that this is entirely within normal limits. Shut up, Peter.) When I've had more than four consecutive hours of sleep, I'll come back and do an edit. For now, please make allowances.

Addendum: I'm so tired that I almost posted this chapter with the title In Which Naruto and Sasuke Are Angsty Dorks in Love (And Haku Is a Super Badass Big Sister). Sleep-deprived Kat is ever amusing and good for a laugh, if nothing else. Or at least I amuse myself, idek anymore.

[Leitmotif: A musical theme given to a particular idea or major character of an opera.]

Naruto's back is still pressed flush against the wide, old trunk behind him, but he’s seated on the branch now, arms curled around Sasuke's shoulders as Sasuke kneels as close to him as he can get, until Naruto is practically in his lap. This close, Sasuke can feel the warmth of Naruto's breath stirring his hair, and from where his forehead is pressed to the curve where Naruto's throat meets his shoulder, he can feel the thrum of blood racing beneath the skin.

They’ve been this close before, in sparring or in their wrestling matches back at the Academy or on missions when they either tripped or were thrown into each other, but Sasuke has never actually had the time to appreciate it before. In fact, he can't even remember a time when he was this close to anyone, outside a handful of one-night stands on missions that were…unfulfilling. Sasuke had tolerated each one, but not enthusiastically, and whatever physical attraction there had been waned quickly.

But like this, pressed close to Naruto and with familiar, long-remembered fingers—sporting new callouses and larger than his recollection, but still familiar all the same—sliding through his hair, Sasuke thinks that maybe this is what was missing those few times. Emotional connection, much as he might have scoffed at such a notion seven years ago. There are only a few people Sasuke has ever allowed himself close to, and fewer that he’d claim connection to—and of them, Naruto is the only one with whom he’s ever actually wanted a tie. He wants that more than ever now, something unbreakable and unchangeable, something that won't stretch or break or fray, to bind them together in a way that’s inescapable.

Seven years he’s been searching, ever since that very first day waking up in a Konoha that might as well have been empty to his eyes. Seven years, an entire world of difference in himself from the surly, revenge-obsessed child that he used to be, and this time—

This time he’s not letting Naruto go.

Naruto stirs slightly against him, shifting limbs and resettling, and the arm around Sasuke's shoulder curls just a faint bit tighter, the fingers in his hair smoothing through spiky locks one more time before sliding down to curve over the nape of his neck. Sasuke doesn’t move despite the subtle signs
that this is coming to an end. If anything, he presses forward more, lets Naruto take more of his
weight to pin him in place, and tightens his grip where his arms are wrapped around Naruto's waist.

“Teme,” Naruto huffs at length, soft but still clear, and Sasuke can feel the words in his chest even as
they escape into the air. “This is awesome, but there's a small army after us right now. We should
move before they find us.”

“After you,” Sasuke corrects, just to be a contrary—and because he will forever deny the curl of sun-
bright heat that rises in his chest at Naruto admitting to liking their current position (even if he uses
infantile words like ‘awesome’, which is nowhere near accurate as a descriptor, and Sasuke is
offended by the implication that this can be summed up with any words). Though he still doesn’t
move. “And it’s fine. A…friend agreed to distract them.” He grimaces slightly at having to use that
title, but the-pain-in-my-ass-who-I-am-vaguely-obligated-to-be-courteous-towards is rather a
mouthful. And could possibly be misconstrued.

“Sasuke!” Naruto sounds mildly alarmed. “This whole thing was supposed to be a secret!”

Sasuke rolls his eyes. “Before or after they dispatched that small army to bring you in?” he asks
dryly, and grunts when Naruto punches him in the shoulder. “Hn. Dobe. I didn’t tell him anything,
just asked him to lead them away. He used to be Root, so he knows how to keep them occupied.”

Naruto stiffens at that, but Sasuke doesn’t let himself react, and after a moment he forces his body to
relax once more. One hand slides through Sasuke's hair again as the blond sighs, an edge of clear
aggravation in the sound. “Teme,” he mutters again, but his fingers are gentle. “Ah, damn it. Haku is
going to kill me. How the hell did you manage to get through both levels of my disguise?”

“Both?” Sasuke finally raises his head, arching one brow to make his disbelief even clearer. “You
mean the mask and the contacts?”

Naruto rolls his eyes at him. “No. I mean…” He hesitates, then huffs out a short, sharp breath and
explains, “Youko was the first layer. Anyone who was looking deeper was supposed to find out that
Youko was actually Uzumaki Arashi and then stop looking. But you’ve always been a stubborn
bastard, I guess.”

Sasuke blinks, the final few pieces slotting into place. Somehow, it’s not nearly the surprise it should
be. Naruto was always boasting he’d be Kage someday—he just let everyone assume he meant
Hokage.

“I didn’t,” he admits after a moment. “I just…saw you. With Iruka. You can't hide everything,
especially when you're with one of your precious people.”

“I hid it pretty well when I was with you,” Naruto grumbles, and Sasuke feels another of those
sunbursts of heat in his chest at the back-handed admittance that he’s precious to Naruto. He’d
known that, but…he hadn’t understood it.

But he’s hardly about to say that, so he covers the flicker-flare of emotion with a scoffing, “Hn,” and
a soft thump of his fist against the side of Naruto's head. “That,” he says witheringly over the sounds
of Naruto's wounded offense, “was for that stupid conversation in the market, dead last.”

“I'm a Kage,” Naruto protests, rubbing the side of his head with a glare at Sasuke. It would probably
be more effective if he weren’t fighting a grin, and if Sasuke wasn’t quite so distracted by his
stupidly blue eyes. “You can't call me dead last anymore, teme!”

Sasuke gives him the look that deserves, because he most certainly can. “Hn,” is his only
acknowledgement, but he shifts slightly, settling back on his knees, though he keeps his hands curled tightly around Naruto's waist. He's not taking the chance that Naruto will run halfway through the conversation, because he wants answers. More than that, he'll never allow Naruto to run from him. Not again. “Explain,” he orders.

He can all but see Naruto debating whether or not to play dumb and misinterpret his question, but thankfully for Sasuke's patience, he gives in with another huff and says flatly, “Danzo is rotten.”

Sasuke considers this, considers what he knows of Sai’s past and Danzo's actions, up to and including Sai being assigned to Team 7 in order to find and subdue Naruto, or kill him if that proved impossible. Yes, he can believe that. But he gets the feeling it isn’t the whole story, and arches a brow at Naruto to prompt the rest of it.

Naruto hesitates. He bites his lip and looks away, and Sasuke feels something cold wrap around his chest, banishing even the warmth of Naruto's proximity. “Naruto?” he demands, because even when hiding Naruto has always been straightforward. Even when sidestepping an issue—his childhood, his loneliness, his burden as Konoha's jinchuuriki—he's never avoided it like this. It’s…worrying.

Another second of silence, and then Naruto looks back, something like pained resolution in his eyes. “There's so much, Sasuke,” he finally says, his voice tired and hurting and helpless. “He—he was the reason Uzushio was destroyed the first time. If Danzo hadn’t found Uzushio's weaknesses and given Kiri a way around the barriers, my people would all still be alive. He destroyed the original Akatsuki organization, which was supposed to bring peace, and…and…” He trails off, closing his eyes and dragging his hands through his long hair, fingers catching on the thin braids and in the loose knot and sending the bright strands falling further around his face. Another long moment, and he looks back once more, meeting Sasuke's eyes squarely. “I—Sasuke…” He stops again, and the helplessness is back full-force, something Sasuke has never seen from Naruto before, even in the worst situations.

Reaching forward, Sasuke cups Naruto's cheek briefly, then slides his hand under warm-soft hair to gently grip the back of his neck and pull him closer, until their foreheads are resting together and they're breathing for each other. “Dobe,” he murmurs, and the familiar insult carries more affection than any regular endearment could. “I'm listening. Just say it.”

Already, there's a sinking weight within his chest. It's…going to be bad, whatever it is.

Naruto breathes out, breathes in again, and says very softly, “Twelve years ago, the Uchiha clan was planning a coup to regain power in Konoha, since they felt like they were being ostracized by the rest of the village. The Sandaime and Danzo caught wind of it. Sarutobi wanted to find a diplomatic solution, but…Danzo didn’t. He went behind the Hokage's back, and…”

“He used Itachi,” Sasuke finishes, when Naruto doesn’t, because he can see where this is going. Moreover, he saw where it went. He remembers the blood and bodies and his brother standing over him, face Uchiha-blank but for his wild eyes. Looking back on it, Sasuke had always thought that the madness was what caused the massacre. But…what if it was the other way around?

He closes his eyes, torn between grief and fury, both equally white-hot as they churn together in his gut, and a strange, overwhelming, staggering sort of relief. By all rights, he shouldn’t be feeling that, shouldn’t even think of it, because no matter the cause Itachi still committed the crime. He still killed everyone, even their parents, slaughtered an entire clan in the space of one night, but—

But it wasn’t his decision. He was following orders, the way he always did. Orders from the wrong person, perhaps, but there has to be a reason for that, some sort of explanation why Itachi, who disliked violence, would conspire with Danzo rather than Sarutobi, who had no taste for senseless
killing. A reason why Sasuke alone was spared that night, and the sinking sensation turns to a rock in Sasuke's stomach as he realizes the two are more than likely related.

*Leverage,* he thinks, feeling sick, and he's hardly innocent, has been a shinobi since he was eleven and part of ANBU since he was fifteen, but...this was an entire clan. A clan of Konoha, from the elders right down to the infants, and—

Sasuke pulls in a shaking, shuddering breath, the ache in his lungs telling him that he’d forgotten how to for a long moment. A soft sound slips out of his throat without his dazed brain’s approval, something low and wounded and almost animalistic, and his hands ache where they're clenched tight around Naruto's sides, though the blond has yet to complain.

“Sorry,” Naruto whispers into the still air between them, and Sasuke can tell from the rawness in his voice that he really is—sorry to be the bearer of such news, sorry for Sasuke's loss, sorry for the emotional turmoil he’s inflicted with a handful of unassuming words. “Sorry, Sasuke, I'm so sorry.” He winds his arms around Sasuke's shoulders again and pulls him in even as he leans back against the tree trunk, letting Sasuke fall against his chest. It’s...good. Like this, Sasuke can pretend, if only to himself, that he’s being held against his will. That Naruto initiated this...this hug, and he had no part in it. That he doesn’t want the comfort of touch, of another person’s warmth, of Naruto’s heart beating a steady tattoo beneath his cheek.

He can pretend, can put on a mask, but in the darkness of the nighttime forest Sasuke lets himself grip Naruto just as firmly in return, lets himself cling and press his face against Naruto’s chest and breathe in the sea-air and sun-wind scent of him, and mourn for his older brother the way he’s never allowed himself to do before.

“Can you see anything yet?”

Ao grunts in disgusted aggravation, not even bothering to activate his Byakugan again. More than likely, the view hasn’t changed at all, just the way it hasn’t over the past five days. “No, Chōjūrō, I can't,” he snaps, wishing to be anywhere else, with anyone else. Preferably back in Kiri guarding the Mizukage like he’s supposed to, rather than trapped on a small boat in the middle of the ocean, chasing rumors, and unable to escape the company of one of the most annoying men—if he can even be called such—in existence.

Waving a hand, he glances towards the heat-haze blur stretching out on their right like some sort of wall, completely obscuring whatever’s behind it. Whirlpool Country, going by the map, not that one can tell by looking at it. “My eye sees *chakra,* not through *chakra,* and when I look at that, all I can see are...sparkles.” He grimaces at the last word, disgusted with his own abilities and the barrier equally.

Chōjūrō adjusts his glasses, seated cross-legged on one of the lashed crates of fish that are the only productive part of their mission so far. However, Ao has a sneaking suspicion that Mei will not be impressed when presented with several hundred pounds of fish under a preservation seal rather than the answers about Whirlpool that she sent them out for. “I see...I think,” he says nervously, and Ao rolls his eyes and bites back the sharp reprimand that wants to come out. After almost twelve years under Terumi Mei’s constant death threats, reining in his tongue has become something of a habit even when she isn’t present, though it admittedly sometimes escapes him.

Possibly that’s why she assigned him this mission in the first place, though Ao would like to think his Mizukage isn’t quite as petty as that. She *knows* his opinion of Chōjūrō, damn it.
And then Chōjūrō opens his mouth to add something else, and his breath comes out as a cloud of white fog.

Ao stiffens, leaping to his feet as he draws a kunai, but before he can move there's a whirl of even colder air, a rush of chakra, and the water beneath the ship surges upwards to trap them even as it turns to solid ice. Wood creaks dangerously at the sudden change in temperature, and Ao spares a brief thought to pray for the integrity of the hull, even as he throws himself towards the dark figure just landing on the deck. The attacker doesn’t move, though, and Ao recognizes the distraction for what it is half a second before something bright and glittering and utterly blinding sweeps through the air around him. Cursing, he falls back to where he can feel Chōjūrō’s presence, still and wary but steady, and blinks rapidly in an attempt to readjust his eyes.

When his vision returns, it’s to the sight of that same dark-haired figure still standing by the railing, breath emerging in icy gusts, with four more strange shinobi grouped around him. In the air above them, beetle-like wings beating so rapidly as to be a blur, is another shinobi, likely the one who dropped that blinding powder over their heads.

“They’re wearing hitai-ate,” Chōjūrō breathes, sounding stunned even though he has Hiramekarei in hand and ready, and Ao takes another look. Those are indeed hitai-ate, and the tight spiral within a circle is a familiar symbol, though he hasn’t seen it in a very long time. Not rogues, apparently, or missing-nin.

“Twelve more below deck,” the redheaded kunoichi in the group says, her gaze slightly unfocused in a way Ao is entirely familiar with. A sensor, then. “Plus these two, and the idiot hiding behind that crate over there, planning to do something stupid.”

Ao risks a glance, and sure enough, one of the brasher jounin catches his look and winces. He just barely keeps from rolling his eyes. In his day—

“Underhanded as always,” the young—man? Woman? Well, the one at the front of the group says it with faint smile, one that doesn’t reach hard brown eyes. The shinobi’s attention shifts, and she (he?) looks at Ao, clearly identifying him as the leader. “Kiriakure should be aware that these waters belong to Whirlpool Country,” he (possibly?) says politely, confirming Ao’s suspicion that these five aren’t just some ragtag band claiming a piece of territory. Not if they’re defending Whirlpool as a whole. “State your intentions here, or we will be obliged to remove you. With force, if necessary.”

“Haku…” The tall, orange-haired man just behind the brunet (brunette?) makes an aborted movement, as though to step forward, and the dark-haired shinobi stills. A breath, and then he (she?) nods faintly.

“Yes, Jūgo. I am aware of our orders.” That sharp gaze flickers back up, locking with Ao’s, and the shinobi raises an elegant brow. “Your explanation?”

“Your identity?” Ao retorts. “Who are you? Give me a reason I should be explaining myself to you.”

The leader’s eyes narrow faintly, but the answer comes unhesitatingly. “I am Haku, chief bodyguard of the Yondaime Uzukage. This is Uzumaki Karin, head of our Sensor Division—” The redheaded kunoichi huffs and pushes her glasses up “—Jūgo of Otogakure—” A polite nod from the orange-haired man “—and Uzumaki Anzu and her husband Ken, two of our elite jounin.” The pair to the left, a woman with red hair so dark it’s nearly black, and a man with the fair hair and dark skin common to Kumo, incline their heads, though their gazes never waver and their hands remain securely on their weapons.

But Ao’s brain is stuck somewhere around ‘Uzukage’ and the gravity with which it was spoken. Not
an imposter, not a fake, but a *Kage*, one whose people respect them, one with a village large enough to have both a Sensor Division and elite jounin.

So this is why there's been a sudden decrease in missions for Kiri coming from the islands. *This is* why Whirlpool has been covered with a barrier strong enough to keep out a veritable army, and has secluded itself apart from a few clandestine trade routes with some of the smaller countries. After all, a village is weakest during its construction—or its rebuilding, in this case—and its Kage likely wanted to conceal all knowledge of it from those who might take advantage. And, given that it was Kiri that destroyed Uzushio the first time… Ao hides a wince, realizing that this is *not*, as he had first thought, an overly antagonistic approach to peaceful observation, but an entirely understandable reaction after the last time Kiri entered Whirlpool’s waters.

“We’re not here to fight,” Chōjūrō says, stepping forward and raising his hands peaceably. “Mizukage-sama was worried about the state of Whirlpool Country after its sudden withdrawal from the rest of the nations. She feels responsible for its state, given…” He trails off looking awkward, clearly uncertain how to broach the subject.

“Given that one of her predecessors was the reason that Whirlpool lost its main line of defense when he razed Uzushio?” the older woman finishes for him, her mouth a tight, flat line. Ao studies her, and at her age she was likely a child when Uzushio fell—maybe even a genin or a newly-minted chuunin. He swallows the sharp pang of regret and forces himself to nod.

“Yes,” he agrees. “Mizukage-sama wishes to right Kiri’s wrongs, no matter how old. She sent us for that reason. We mean no harm.”

With a buzz of insect wings and a soft thump, the green-haired kunoichi—the only one not introduced, Ao notes, his eyes narrowing in sudden suspicion—lands on the railing, easily balanced despite the sharp angle of the tilted ship. “They’re telling the truth, in case you were wondering,” she offers cheerfully, though her eyes are sharp as they flit from one Kiri shinobi to the other. She alone, Ao realizes, sports a slightly different hitai-ate than her companions. It still bears Uzushio’s spiral, but there are six wings and a line like a half-curled tail emerging from the surrounding circle, evenly spaced and carefully drawn, not the kind of thing done with a kunai in a fit of creativity. It means something, obviously, but Ao suspects this isn’t the best time to ask.

Haku looks at her for a moment, then looks away, but the tension has mostly eased from his shoulders, and he takes a step back. “Whirlpool is well,” he says, lifting his chin, and there's something like challenge in his eyes, though his words are perfectly polite. “As your Kage will see in a week if she is attending the Chuunin Exams. Please, next time you come on a diplomatic mission, give warning so that we can greet you properly.”

A swift, flowing gesture, and the ice holding the ship in place shatters with a sharp crack. The green-haired kunoichi launches herself off the railing, even as the others leap over the side, and in less than ten seconds all six have retreated through the barrier, leaving the Kiri shinobi scrambling to find their footing.

Both, Ao thinks a little sourly, on the rocking ship and in a far more general sense.

He can't even image what Mei will say when she hears about *this*. 
Second Movement: Stray Stars Serenade

[Serenade: A lighthearted piece written in several movements, usually intended as background music.]

By all rights, Sasuke should leave. He should step back, step away, let Naruto go back to his room at the inn and keep their relationship exactly the same as Youko and Sasuke's has been since the Uzushio nin’s arrival—polite, wary distance, with an edge of suspicion and distrust. It would be safer for both of them that way, better for their plans to bring Danzo's actions to Tsunade's attention.

But of all the things Sasuke is prepared to do, that is not one of them. He’s not about to let any distance come between him and Naruto, not for anything. Not now, after so long.

Naruto doesn’t protest either, though, when Sasuke makes no move to leave and allow them to enter the village separately. He’s mostly quiet as they walk back through the dark woods, approaching Konoha from the opposite direction of Danzo's base so as not to arouse suspicion. They’ve been out long enough that the witching hour has turned to early morning, and the pale light of false dawn is spreading across the sky. The storm clouds that have been gathering for the past few days are still present, hanging low and heavy and unstirred by the faint, cool wind that’s picking up. Sasuke eyes them, wondering about rain, but then dismisses the thought in favor of studying his companion.

The blue eyes are green again, thanks to another pair of colored contacts, and Sasuke feels a disproportionate sense of loss in the face the simple disguise. The mask is in place again, too, but Sasuke knows Naruto's face well enough, has seen it in his mind’s eye enough that he doesn’t need to see it. But the eyes—

The eyes are a loss to him, an ache, and Sasuke doesn’t care to think what that says of either him or his state of mind where his runaway teammate is concerned. Maybe it’s because whenever he thinks of Naruto, he thinks of determination and humor and enthusiasm and relentless good cheer, all wrapped up in sky. Maybe it’s because of all the things he remembered about Naruto over those seven years, he could never quite recall the exact shade of that warm gaze. Maybe it’s because even when Naruto hides everything possible behind a smile, his eyes still show so clearly what he’s feeling.

Maybe it’s because Sasuke's just unaccountably fond of the color blue.

The gate is in view now, and that too feels like a loss, like maybe once they leave the peace of the forest there won't be anything left between them, none of the closeness or kisses. Just Naruto ahead and Sasuke chasing his shadow, the way it has been for seven years already. He tenses a little, as though preparing for Naruto to up and bolt, but instead, the blond turns to him with his eyes crinkled in a grin Sasuke can all but feel, even hidden beneath the mask as it is.

“Just in time for breakfast,” he offers cheerfully, and makes an aborted motion as though to cross his arms behind his head. Catching himself in time, he huffs a soft, aggrieved breath and instead tucks them into the sleeves of his dark blue kimono, which perfectly hides the more form-fitting black outfit beneath. Sasuke will never admit to being impressed by the former dead last’s planning, because he suspects Haku had a hand in it—or two—but he’ll begrudgingly allow that Naruto's sneaking, at least, had all bases covered. He’d been about to escape even before Sasuke interfered.

“We’re not getting ramen, dobe,” he retorts, because he can already see where this is leading. Maybe Sasuke has eaten ramen for breakfast once or twice—and no one will even know whether it was nostalgia or laziness that drove him to it, because Sasuke is taking that secret to his grave—but he’s
hardly about to let Naruto get away with anything. Not after so long without their easy rivalry.

Thankfully, Naruto doesn’t comment on the implication that they’re staying together. His eyes even brighten, as though he likes it, and what he says is an indignant, “Teme! I wasn’t about to suggest that! I do realize how not to act like myself, you know.”

Sasuke politely refrains from voicing his extreme skepticism, because honestly, it only took him a handful of days to figure out Naruto’s identity, and while he’s one of Konoha’s geniuses, he’s not a genius with people, certainly. A sharp roll of his eyes escapes, though, and he thinks that more than speaks for him. But they’re within earshot of the gate now, so Naruto can only growl lowly at him before readjusting his body language to read as completely unconcerned.

Another instance where Sasuke will never admit to being impressed, but is. Slightly.

Shifts are just changing as they reach the entrance, Kiba and Akamaru making way for Kotetsu and Izumo with a yawn. Kiba waves absently to Sasuke, and the big white-and-red dog barks a slightly more polite greeting.

“Kiba,” Sasuke murmurs with a nod, because Naruto is walking at his elbow and he feels far more at peace with the world than usual, even given the revelations in the forest. “Akamaru.”

“Yo,” the tokujo answers easily, eyes tracking to Naruto without fail. “Bit early for a walk, Uchiha.”

“Uchiha-san was polite enough to show me some of the more interesting parts of the local forests,” Naruto says, and Sasuke is easily able to pick out his Youko-voice, slightly more cultured and far more diplomatic than his normal one. And, all right, maybe it’s not a complete surprise that no one else has figured him out yet. “We don’t have trees like yours back in Whirlpool.”

Kiba manages to look lazy, even though his gaze is sharp—something he has in common with Shikamaru, though Sasuke will never, ever make such a comparison out loud. He sniffs subtly at the air, and Sasuke spares a moment to pray that Naruto’s scent is the same sea-wind one he’s had since he arrived, and that their little jaunt in the woods didn’t bring back Naruto’s old clear-air-and-water smell. Inuzuka noses are a little daunting, honestly. “You guys have trees?” he asks, and belatedly seems to realize that that could be taken the wrong way. Hinata has managed to teach him some manners, at least. “Uh, no offense.”

Naruto just laughs—Youko’s laugh, Sasuke is glad to note, far more restrained and with an undertone of politeness. He feels…greedy, almost, where the hints as to Naruto’s true identity are concerned. Possessive. Maybe he has no right, but he’d like to think he does. “We have trees, but they’re much smaller, and the wind from the sea is strong enough that they rarely grow straight. Even up on the hills above the village, it’s mostly shrubs and grass.”

Even with all of his missions elsewhere, growing up in Konoha has left Sasuke unable to quite picture such a thing, such a lack of trees and canopy and dense undergrowth. Konoha has clearings and open spaces, yes, but they’re always ringed with trees, or there are trees in the distance, or something. From the look on his face, Kiba can’t really comprehend it, either.

“Huh,” he says, and then, because Akamaru will always be the one with more social graces of the pair, and that’s truly a sad thought, he turns his attention to Sasuke with a shrug. “Uchiha, we’re all meeting at the Crooked Kunai tonight. You coming?”

Sasuke hesitates, torn. It’s become something of a weekly ritual for the Konoha Twelve—eleven, with Naruto gone, though they’ve never quite been able to bring themselves to change the name—to pick a bar and spend the night getting absolutely plastered, complaining about their lives, celebrating
their successes, and mourning their failures. Within a week of Sasuke’s return from his travels with Jiraiya, Ino had dragged him along as well, and now, barring missions, Sasuke just…doesn’t miss it. He tells himself it’s because he can appreciate routine chances to unwind as much as any ANBU.

But tonight—

He casts a glance at Naruto, who’s watching him with one brow faintly quirked. Tonight he planned to spend with Naruto—will spend with Naruto, because Sasuke has been looking for him for the better part of a decade and has finally found him, and he’s already neck-deep in trouble that Sasuke is more or less obligated to pull him out of. Or, barring that, that he’s obligated to jump right into alongside him and hope they don’t both get pulled under. He’s hardly about to let Naruto face down the man who had Sasuke’s entire clan killed on his own.

Apparently, though, Kiba misinterprets their shared glance, because a flicker of slightly horrified comprehension crosses his face and he instantly backpedals, throwing his hands up as though to ward them off. “Or, er, uh—I mean, we can totally put it off for another night, or just survive without you if you’ve got better people—THINGS, I mean better things to do, oh my gods I totally don’t want to know about your sex life even indirectly, uh, bye!”

Sasuke hadn’t actually been aware that Kiba was that proficient at the shunshin. Impressive.

(Kotetsu and Izumo, not quite out of sight by the gate, are all but wheezing with laughter and not even trying to hide it. Perhaps it’s base suspicion on his part, but Sasuke has a feeling the story is going to be all over the village before the sun even rises. They’re inventive, opportunistic bastards when it comes down to it, and make up a good portion of the reason why Sasuke is absolutely, justifiably wary of evil little chuunin.)

There’s a beat of silence in the wake of Kiba’s departure. Then, with a familiar and entirely wicked spark in his eyes, Naruto says, his tone and body language perfectly innocent, “The Crooked Kunai? That’s a bar, right?”

Sasuke bares his teeth in what a blind man might possibly be able to term a smile. “Nine o’clock,” he agrees, more than willing to torture Kiba at any time, especially with Naruto’s implied agreement to tag along. “Do you have plans for the evening?”

There’s a grin beneath the mask, sharp and foxy, and this time when Naruto laughs it’s his real laugh. Sasuke is sort of just totally pleased down to his toes at that. “If that’s an invitation, I do now,” Naruto says, then offers the asphyxiating chuunin a polite wave and heads into the village. Sasuke falls into step beside him, tucking his hands into his pockets, and doesn’t turn off at the intersection heading towards Naruto’s inn. Instead, he leads Naruto back to his own apartment in one of the higher-end shinobi district.

He’s still decompressing, still trying to deal with the revelations dumped on him—trying to fit his brain around Itachi-the-shinobi-loyal-to-the-point-of-insanity rather than Itachi-the-murderous-traitor. Trying to adjust to Naruto kissing him back, and while that’s absolutely fantastic Sasuke would be lying if he said he expected it. His life has never, ever gone as he expects it to, though, so perhaps he should just learn to take it in stride, his preconceptions being blown out of the water like this.

Naruto glances over at him as they reach his door, and Sasuke knows it’s just his imagination, but he’d swear he sees a flicker of summer-sea blue beneath the green. “All right?” he asks, just a breath too soft to be overheard.

Sasuke looks at him and doesn’t look away. (Never again, not if he has any say in the matter, and he will.) Looks at the fall of blond hair, too long to be spiky but trying regardless, the tanned skin
smooth and warm even across the inches between them. The steadiness of that stare, even if it’s the wrong color. The straight back and squared shoulders, head unbowed, no weight of being outcast, being ostracized, to pull him down.

He’s thought it before, that he likes Konoha, loves it, but he loves the people here more than the village itself—especially if the exclusion of the Uchiha was one of the things that led to the coup and resulting massacre, and Sasuke saw how Naruto was treated as a child too many times to feel any doubt—and of those people, Naruto is most precious to him. Hands down, without any doubt at all, and Sasuke feels it like something torn open in his chest, but…warm. Hot, even, not quite an ache because it’s good, this sense of freedom that comes with the recognition of what Naruto is to him. Everything, without fail, and Sasuke has suspected it before, but now he knows.

He looks at Naruto, thinks of the place that has made him what he is now, the shinobi village he built up from ruins into a true power, and understands that when Naruto leaves as he certainly will, Sasuke will go with him. Even if he has to commit treason to do it, Sasuke won't be left behind again.

A breath in, a breath out, and he offers Naruto a small, faint smile. Not strained, not indecisive, because he’s already made his decision and will hold to it, through fire and flood and hell itself.

If Sasuke has one thing going for him, it’s his sheer, bloody-minded stubbornness, after all.

“Yes,” he answers, and his voice doesn’t waver at all. “I'm fine.”

Truth, wholly and utterly.

The rains start in earnest just beyond the border.

Were he alone and not forewarned, Jiraiya would likely charge right in and head for Amegakure without pause, wanting to get this entire bitter mission over with. But Orochimaru is a quiet, steady presence at his side, hood drawn up to shield him from the light drizzle that reaches the Fire Country side of the border. He knows of Pein’s chakra in the rain, his knowledge of everything that goes on within Ame, and has warned Jiraiya at least in passing. He’s still a taciturn, unforthcoming bastard, entirely too fond of secrets for Jiraiya’s peace of mind, but that’s the way he’s always been, and Jiraiya has had enough experience with it that he can adjust and work around it.

“Plan?” he asks softly, crouching down in the undergrowth and peering into the grey dimness that begins a few hundred yards in front of them. “If we can't take so much as a step across the border without being seen, how the hell are we going to make it all the way to their base undetected?”

A hesitation, and then Orochimaru gracefully folds down to kneel beside him, rummaging in one of his pockets. His hand emerges bearing a thick scroll, the paper only about six inches across. “A cheat,” he answers, and quickly unrolls it, revealing almost ten feet of paper intricately marked with seals the like of which Jiraiya, even with all his years of study, has never seen. Feeling almost breathless, he reaches out to trace a finger over one particularly intricate spiral, trying to work out what it's for. Something to do with time and space, he thinks, though he can't tell more without closer study.

“What is this?” he demands, slightly offended, because all three of the Sannin are good at seals, brilliant with them, but Jiraiya has always been better than his teammates in this at least, if nothing else. If Orochimaru did this, though, if he wrote these beautiful, looping, curling seals with their elegance and functionality all tied up in sheer, thrumming power, Jiraiya is going to be obligated to
Thankfully for the future of the Icha Icha series, Orochimaru just chuckles softly, rising to his feet and beckoning for Jiraiya to stand as well. “It was a gift,” he explains, finger ghosting over the paper right next to Jiraiya's. Close enough to touch, and for once they're not at each other’s throats. “From the Uzukage, since he suspected that I would be best left to check up on Akatsuki on my own, given my ties. I placed an anchor seal in one of the empty rooms at their base on my last visit, and this can take us there directly. It’s been charged with chakra, as it takes more than I can safely provide to use it, but the charge should last through at least two jumps, even with a passenger.”

Orochimaru is strong. One of the strongest shinobi in the Elemental Countries, in fact—it’s one of the reasons he’s still alive and kicking, has been able to establish his own village even though he’s the closest the shinobi world has to a monster under the bed. (Or at least he was.) To think that even after almost fifty years of experimenting and learning and pushing boundaries, he’s still not powerful enough to use this seal freely is…daunting. It also makes Jiraiya wonder just what kind of insane chakra tank did charge it. He’s not entirely certain he actually wants to know.

“Will they sense us arriving?” he asks, because surely that much chakra being put out will attract someone’s notice, and if they’re going to have to immediately jump into a fight to the death, he wants to know ahead of time.

The look that earns him is scathing and mildly scornful. “Really, Jiraiya, what do you take me for?” Orochimaru shoves Jiraiya a foot to the left, curls the scroll around his shoulders, and steps up beside him, their sides all but pressed together as he twists the paper to make a loop around them. “The entire room is so tightly warded that no one would notice a Kage going all out, even if they were standing in the hall. This will be fine.”

Jiraiya is fairly dubious, but only because he remembers a good many missions when they were kids starting with those words that went to shit almost immediately, and his luck isn’t good enough to make him think that this one won’t be the same. Still, they’re both older now, better prepared for just about anything, and Orochimaru has given him a very thorough accounting of the various members’ strengths and weaknesses. It will have to be enough.

Orochimaru smears a long streak of blood across one end of the scroll, forms a quick hand sign, and murmurs, “Transport.” With a crinkling, rustling rush, the scroll comes to life, whirling around them as it starts to glow, and there’s a near-explosion of power and light. Jiraiya yelps, automatically latching on to Orochimaru’s arm. He drags him a step closer, trying almost desperately to keep the other man from getting swept away as the ground lurches beneath their feet, and it’s a startling comfort to feel Orochimaru’s hand just as firmly around his own wrist as darkness closes in.

It’s not unconsciousness, Jiraiya realizes a little belatedly, blinking into the oppressive black around them as the scroll rolls itself neatly back up and drops to the ground with a clatter. They’re in a small room, judging by the feel of the air, and there isn’t a hint of light to be seen.

“If you want light,” Orochimaru says, sounding faintly aggravated and, as happened all too frequently as children, apparently reading his mind, “you’d best do something about it, Jiraiya. My fire jutsus still have a tendency to end…explosively.”

Jiraiya makes a face, because for all his genius, Orochimaru has never quite managed to achieve anything less destructive than a supernova when using a Katon jutsu. Privately, he suspects that it’s one of the reasons Orochimaru is so hell-bent on learning every jutsu in existence—he absolutely loathes being inept at anything. Especially when he’s always so deft and subtle with all of his other jutsus.
“Yeah, yeah, keep your hair on,” he mutters in the tone he knows directly bypasses the leash Orochimaru keeps on his temper, and swallows a grin at the low hiss it earns him. After a moment of concentration, fire sparks above his palm, and the room is thrown into flickering relief, bare and thankfully empty, with seals on the walls and floor. Orochimaru stoops to pick up the transportation seal and carefully tucks it away, then drops down to sit lotus-style and rests his hands on his knees, arching an expectant eyebrow at his former teammate.

Rolling his eyes, Jiraiya joins him. It’s war council time now, obviously. Gods forbid he get any say in the matter.

It’s mildly reassuring when Orochimaru conjures a set of blueprints from somewhere within his voluminous robes and spreads the papers out between them, laying one long finger over a room on the bottom floor. “We’re here,” he murmurs, and traces a path down the hall and up a set of stairs. “This is where general quarters are, with Deidara and Sasori’s rooms first. Deidara at least will be simple enough to deal with—he’s still entirely human, regardless of his bloodline. Sasori will need to be sealed away before he can access any of his puppets and make a nuisance of himself. Itachi’s room is here, but he tends towards insomnia, and it’s best not to expect him to be there right now. Then Kisame, who will be…troublesome.”

“The Monster of the Hidden Mist? Yeah, I’d say so,” Jiraiya mutters, narrowing his eyes in thought. With that sword of his, chakra-based attacks will be worse than useless. It also means that Orochimaru definitely isn’t the best person to face him—for all his power, Orochimaru is and always has been more focused on ninjutsu than anything else.

From the expression he’s wearing, Orochimaru understands that, too. The faint sideways pull to his mouth, not quite a grimace but certainly not a happy expression, is familiar—Jiraiya used to see it when Sarutobi would teach him Katon techniques and Orochimaru would be forced to sit out and simply watch.

“The Five Elements Seal wouldn’t hurt,” the Snake Sannin ventures after a moment of consideration. “Given Samehada’s abilities…”

Now there’s a thought.

Jiraiya grins. Orochimaru meets his eyes, smirking faintly, and Jiraiya wonders if it’s stupid to feel like the two of them together could take on nations.

Given past events, probably not.

With a laugh that’s far more optimistic than it likely should be, Jiraiya levers himself to his feet and offers Orochimaru a hand up. “Let’s get to it, then,” he says.

Orochimaru smiles back at him, just faintly and with an edge of arrogant certainty, but he takes the proffered hand and lets Jiraiya pull him to his feet.

“Let’s,” he agrees, and they walk shoulder-to-shoulder as they head down the hall.
Third Movement: False Traitor's Trill

Chapter Notes

Personal opinion of Itachi: the dude is batshit. Sorry, because I know most of fandom has him on this immense pedestal, but while I respect his suffering it’s mostly of his own making, and regardless, he’s so very much a part of the fucked-up mess Sasuke became. So. I think I’ve represented him more or less fairly here, but if enough people disagree, I’ll…hop back and rewrite it or something. orz

[Trill: Rapid alternation between notes that are a half tone or whole tone apart.]

Itachi is weary down to his bones.

He’s lived far longer than he ever planned to, longer than he ever even vaguely considered he would be able to. Twelve years ago, when he planted the seed of destruction in his little brother’s mind, he had done it with a full understanding of Sasuke’s nature, his recklessness and single-minded drive and strain of Uchiha madness. He had even accounted for the fact that Sasuke would grow up alone, outside of the Clan’s influence, and be less susceptible because of it. A few words, a bloody and unforgettable nightmare, a betrayal by the one Sasuke loved best—that was all it took to activate the Curse of Hatred so very much a part of an Uchiha’s genetic makeup.

It is a funny thing, their curse. The source of their power, of the Sharingan, but at the same time their inevitable downfall. Itachi knows very well the pain of it, of the transformation into the Mangekyo. Sometimes even now he can feel Shisui pressing his bloody eye into Itachi’s hand, smiling all the while. Can feel the burn of it in his veins, grief and is this because of me what have I done and the loss of the only Uchiha who ever understood him completely. Afterwards, it felt right to be blamed for his death, to be looked on as a murderer, because wasn’t he?

(He’ll catch himself, sometimes, writing Shisui’s name as water death, rather than still water, and it makes him want to laugh until the ache is gone, until the regret is fully buried the way it never really is. Makes him want to rage, because the Curse should have taken him then, swallowed him up and allowed him the reprieve of simple madness. But his loyalty to Konoha had saved him even as it doomed him, and he’d been left alive and alone, a pacifist responsible for more deaths than most mass-murderers, a traitor to the village he would do anything to save, a mortal enemy to the little brother he loves more than life itself.)

But the Curse hadn’t taken Sasuke, in the end, and it’s something that still mystifies Itachi, for all his genius. For five years, all had gone according to plan. Sasuke had hated him, and hunted him, and seemed dead set on killing him, and Itachi had felt relief when he likely should have felt regret. So he’d kept to his course, worked with the Akatsuki for their mad goal and watched Madara use them from the shadows like so many eager puppets, and he’d been content in the knowledge that everything was going as he’d predicted.

And then one day, Sasuke had just…stopped. There had been no more inquiries as to Itachi’s whereabouts and plans. Instead, Sasuke had asked after his missing teammate, the Kyuubi jinchuuriki. He’d spent the two years he was outside the village—with Jiraiya, and something in Itachi cringes at the thought of how much damage the self-proclaimed pervert might have inflicted on his innocent brother—looking for the Uzumaki boy, and even now, five years later, has yet to give
any indication that he still wants revenge.

It’s…

For the most part, Itachi doesn’t know whether to be upset or glad. On the one hand, it’s turned all of his plans on their head. On the other, Sasuke will forever be a sweet, smiling seven-year-old in his mind, no matter how much time passes, and turning him into a vengeance-driven killer never sat comfortably with Itachi, regardless of his resolve.

If Itachi wishes to…motivate his brother again, it’s more than likely that he’ll have to kill Uzumaki Naruto to do it. Perhaps it’s trite, but love can either subvert the Curse of Hatred or bring it blazing back to life, and Itachi is certain that Sasuke's love for Uzumaki was what pulled him back the first time. Logically, the jinchuuriki’s death would send him right over the edge. Such a thing would even line up neatly with Akatsuki’s aims, and bring Itachi one step closer to being in Madara’s circle—miniscule though it is—of trust. Their shared blood is that much of an advantage, at least.

However, killing Uzumaki has the same problems inherent in any plan to gather the tailed beasts—namely, the fact that five have entirely vanished, hidden away to the extent that even Madara and all his power, even Pein with his Rinnegan and Sasori with his spy ring can find no trace of them. Two have been captured, yes, but the remaining two—widely known and honored, which also increases the difficulty of taking them—have grown markedly wary and elusive, staying one step ahead of any pursuers as though privy to all of the Akatsuki’s movements. Itachi would suspect a mole, but he honestly doubts that any of his fellow members would betray the organization. They're all content playing pawn in some greater game.

Uncoiling from his seat on a boulder above the hideout, Itachi stretches subtly and lets out a silent breath. There's no stiffness—he’s too well-trained a shinobi to allow his muscles to freeze up, even so close to his allies—but he feels even more tired than when he emerged to watch the sunrise. Sleep is hard to come by, an indulgence he rarely manages to attain. His illness is an ache in his chest, burning and throbbing, and despite Kabuto frequently pilfering medicines from Orochimaru and delivering them whenever he comes to give Sasori his reports, he's not getting better. Continued existence is about all he can hope for, right now, and that alone is hard enough.

He won't die, not until Sasuke comes to kill him as penance for his slaughter of their clan, but sometimes he very much wants to.

Itachi takes one last look at the sun, well above the horizon and spilling its light across the valley. He takes a single moment more to himself, committing the sight to memory, and then turns back towards the entrance. There are no missions today, so he may as well try for at least a few hours of sleep.

He takes three steps back towards the door, and then the entire wall of earth around it explodes outwards.

Itachi blinks.

There's a roar like a wounded animal, a thunder of heavy footsteps, and slim figure in grey robes comes flying out of the newly enlarged opening, landing in a crouch on the hillside even as Kisame charges out after him. Samehada is out and unwrapped, but a good chunk of the shark-like mouth is missing, and long, impossibly deep slashes have trimmed it down to a far less intimidating size. Kisame roars, clearly furious beyond anything Itachi has seen of him, and lunges with his sword leading. The figure in grey moves to meet him without pause, and Samehada strikes a far more slender jian with a sound like a clear, bright bell.

Purple scales flutter and fall away, and the other shinobi smirks, long black hair whirling around him
as he disengages, ducks another swing, and darts back out of reach.

“And you call yourself a swordsman?” Orochimaru mocks, twisting Kusanagi showily in one hand. “Surely one of the last of the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist can do better.”

“I’ll beat you into the ground!” Kisame bellows, and this is normally where he would summon his water, raising an inescapable dome around himself and his opponent, but instead he lunges again. Orochimaru laughs like it’s a victory, cold and superior and contemptuous, and brings Kusanagi to bear once more.

Itachi is already moving, because despite his loyalties to Konoha Orochimaru is most certainly not included, and even if the Snake Sage can match Kisame one on one he won’t have a hope against Kisame and Itachi both. But half an instant before he reaches the dueling pair, a gout of flame waylays him, and he has to leap back and away to keep from being burned. When the fire clears, Jiraiya is standing before him, dark eyes sharp and hard.

“Uchiha Itachi,” he murmurs, and Itachi is far more used to seeing the fool he plays rather than the dangerous man he actually is, so much so that his stare is nearly startling in its intensity.

“…The Sannin Jiraiya,” he acknowledges after a beat of confusion. His mind is already racing, because Jiraiya and Orochimaru both have their backs to each other, which is…unexpected. They're here together, fighting together, and the fact that Deidara and Sasori have yet to emerge from the tunnels likely means they’ve been incapacitated in some way. The mere fact that the two Sannin are present at one of Akatsuki’s best-hidden bases is cause enough for worry, but together, all of these facts add up to a picture that Itachi is…displeased with.

Itachi spares half a glance for Kisame, and barely contains a wince on his partner’s behalf when he sees Kusanagi take another chunk out of the shark-sword. Clearly, the rumors that it can cut through almost anything are true. No wonder Kisame lost control of his temper—he loves his sword to a likely unhealthy degree.

“So,” Jiraiya says lightly, and Itachi looks back at him, feeling the ripple of chakra gathering and building. Tensing—because whatever Jiraiya is preparing, it’s probably big and capable of widespread destruction—Itachi readies himself to leap out of the way and hit the Sage with a genjutsu, only to be entirely floored when Jiraiya asks casually, “Any idea why Nagato, Konan, and Madara saw us coming and bailed? They even left fish-face over there to distract us.”

Itachi blinks again.

What?

“They left?” he demands, and his voice comes out far sharper than he intended. Pein and Madara are both capable of leveling anyone before them, including the two Sages and whatever help they might call up. To leave—and, moreover, to leave without gathering the rest of the organization, with Sasori and Deidara nowhere to be found and only Itachi and Kisame to stand against them—without stopping to fight, or even attempting to weaken them?

They're in the process of doing something, something delicate that they can't afford to have interrupted. But…Itachi has heard nothing about future plans. Not a word, and regardless of his true allegiances he’s one of the strongest, most driven members. Why wasn’t he informed?

“Yeah,” Jiraiya affirms, watching Itachi’s expression closely. Realizing this, he carefully smooths out any emotion into simple blankness, and hopes he didn’t give any of his thoughts away. “Funny, that. ‘Course, Orochi and I had the bad luck of bursting into their meeting, but to be honest, I'm a little
insulted that we didn’t warrant anything more than a smokescreen. You wouldn’t happen to know anything about that, would you, Uchiha?”

Before he can answer, Orochimaru flashes between them, almost too fast to see, and Itachi has to leap back a step to keep from being flattened by his partner, who’s still in pursuit, his grin wide and particularly bloodthirsty. “Jiraiya,” the Snake Sannin snarls, a wealth of meaning and emotion both contained three syllables, and then slides to the side like one of his summons to avoid a blow that takes off a lock of hair. As it flutters to the ground, Orochimaru hisses at Kisame with tightly contained fury and slams him back through two trees with a vicious wind jutsu.

Jiraiya laughs, as though this is the funniest thing he’s seen in a week, and ducks forward. “Trade you, princess,” he offers cheerfully, a whirling orb of chakra already forming in one hand, and Orochimaru falls back like they’ve practiced this exact movement countless times before.

“He’s yours,” Orochimaru responds, and smirks at Itachi as he comes to a halt in front of him. “Which, I suppose, would make you mine.”

Itachi doesn’t fight a grimace. Orochimaru was already banished by the time he was cognizant, but he’s encountered the man a handful of times as a missing-nin and is very much not fond of him. Especially given the threat that Orochimaru, with his desire for the Sharingan, poses to Sasuke. Before he can respond, though, Jiraiya scoffs and calls, “Stop sounding like a creep, teme!” even as he traps Kisame in a dome of earth.

Orochimaru hisses at him, too, even though his eyes never leave Itachi. “Don’t think I’ve forgotten what you just called me, fool,” he warns sharply, and then his gaze seems to catch on something within Itachi’s body, along the edges of his chakra, and his smirk returns wider than ever. “Oh. How convenient. I see you’ve been taking your medicine like a good little boy.”

“Still creepy, bastard!” Jiraiya laughs, a cocoon of spikes closing around him as Kisame attacks, but Itachi has no attention to spare for the two Sannin’s byplay. He tenses, the meaning of the Snake Sage’s words striking him in a rush. Kabuto. Kabuto is the traitor, even though Sasori has always sworn the man is solely his puppet, and therefore his claims of having stolen medicine from Orochimaru are likely false. So Itachi has been taking medicine from Orochimaru, and that is—

His body stiffens, seizes like he’s just ingested a double helping of paralytic, and he falls to his knees and then collapses the rest of the way to the ground, frantically grabbing for his chakra. It comes, but in the same instant Itachi feels a cold hand settle over his stomach, and a power that’s definitely not his flares. When it fades, there’s…nothing. No Sharingan, no jutsus, no chakra at all.

Not since the day he started his training has Itachi ever felt this horribly, achingly defenseless.

“And once more, cunning wins out over strength,” Orochimaru muses from somewhere above him. “Genius and resolve will only take you so far, boy, especially when your opponent is the same.” The Snake Sannin strides away, light-footed, and a sharply snapped jutsu makes the earth shake. Kisame cries out once, snarls, and roars as his footsteps thunder forward.

“Orochimaru!” Jiraiya shouts, and then fire and wind rise in tandem from two different directions. A body hits the ground, slack and all the heavier for it, and the smell of scorched flesh reaches Itachi where he lies. He’d close his eyes if he could, would mourn if he were able, because Kisame was a friend found where he’d never expected. But they were also both missing-nin, and of all the ways Kisame could have died as a soldier of Akatsuki, this likely would have been his choice. A fight against a powerful opponent—two, even—and a relatively clean death.

“I think that’s technically cheating,” Jiraiya says after a moment.
Orochimaru snorts, but there's a pained undertone to it that's new. "It worked," he says dryly. "By virtue of that and being used by a shinobi, it's not cheating. It's clever strategy."

"Drugging his medicine? That sounds like cheating to me. Especially since I had to face the big guy without even a sword."

"And I assisted you, both by weakening him beforehand and dividing his focus afterwards. By your definition, that would also be cheating."

A soft snort, a slap like Jiraiya clapped the other man on the shoulder, and a wry, "I never said I didn't appreciate it, bastard. But now what? Any idea where the others might have headed?"

There's a long pause, and then a sigh. "In four days, Uzushio will send at least three jinchuuriki to Konoha—possibly more, if either Roushi or Utakata intend to play diplomat and Uzukage's assistant. It will be the first time since the creation of Uzushio's wards that more jinchuuriki will be out of the village than in it. Even if the Akatsuki are currently unaware of the tailed beasts' presence, a chance to assess Uzushio's strength is not something they can afford to miss, and once they see who exactly is representing the village…" Another pause, another pained breath, and then rapid footsteps.

"Orochimaru, you idiot, tell me when you're bleeding!"

"Despite your opinion of me, Jiraiya," Orochimaru bites out, "I am not a damsel you must rescue every time we go into a fight."

"You think I don't know that? You saved my ass just as many times as I saved yours when we were kids, and you're no more a damsel in distress than Tsunade—"

"Jiraiya—"

"Ah, whoops, um— So, prisoner! What do we do with him?"

The silence that stretches out is dangerous. But, after a moment, Orochimaru huffs and says, "There are a pair of seals on him right now—an even-numbered one to regulate his chakra, and then the Five Elements Seal to counteract the first by disrupting his chakra system. I'll need to reapply them in a few hours, given his ability level, but the drugs' effect will last until I release the jutsu. It should be safe enough to take him with us."

Itachi wishes he could grit his teeth. The Five Elements Seal—of course. He encounters sealing used as a weapon so infrequently that he rarely anticipates it. Usually that’s fine, since practically no one has mastered it well enough to use it in a fight, but if he survives this he’ll never make that mistake again.

But as long as they don’t kill him outright—and a very large part of him is surprised they haven’t, given Orochimaru’s reputation and Jiraiya’s devotion to protecting the village—it’s fine. He’s already gleaned enough information to set his thoughts to whirling again.

Uzushio is where the jinchuuriki are? Their barriers are what have kept the tailed beasts safe for the last six years? It makes so much sense, and Itachi wonders why he never connected the pieces before. The jinchuuriki vanishing, Uzumaki leaving, shinobi deserting their countries and heading for the coast only to disappear—Uzushio has reformed, and it seems the village has started taking in strays.

Paper rustles, like a scroll unfurling, and pulls him out of his thoughts. "I can take us a little over halfway back," Orochimaru says. "We'll have to run the rest of the way. Get him up and come here."
A large hand grips Itachi’s bicep and hauls him upright, though his body stays limp and well beyond his control. Itachi ignores the way it makes his head spin, and occupies himself with figuring out just how he’s going to make Orochimaru and Jiraiya regret this to the ends of their days.

The storm that’s threatening has yet to break, even though the clouds have been dipping lower and lower all day, even though the sun is going down and the air is once more still and muggy. Ino raises a hand to shield her eyes from the light of the dying sun, just slipping though the cloud-cover on the far horizon, and searches the sky for any hint of blue. There were patches, earlier, but now the entire sky is grey-black and getting darker.

On her left, Shikamaru squints upward as well, then turns back to the entrance of the bar with a huffed, “Troublesome. No good cloud-watching in this weather.”

Ino rolls her eyes. “You could,” she points out. “You just wouldn’t be able to see anything but clouds. And I would kick your ass for being a lazy layabout.”

“If my mother didn’t like you…” Shikamaru mutters, but it’s under his breath, and for his sake Ino pretends not to hear it. He said yes when she proposed, so he has absolutely no room to complain. Everything that’s happened from there on out can be classified as completely his fault.

“Is everyone coming tonight?” she asks instead, and gives Shikamaru her sweetest smile until he opens the door for her, looking longsuffering.

Shikamaru pauses for half a beat, calling up mission rosters and assignments in his head the way pretty much only he can do. (Ino never quite forgets that he’s a genius, but sometimes she remembers to appreciate it more than she usually does.) “Neji and Tenten will, as soon as they’re off duty,” he says, frowning faintly. “Hinata is on leave, so most likely, and Kiba…said he was coming, but he seemed distracted. Choji should be here soon, and Shino was coming after he finished training. Lee and Sakura, too.”

“Good. It’s been a few weeks since we could all meet up.” They’re early, so Ino doesn’t expect to see anyone sitting in their usual corner as she drags Shikamaru through the scattered tables. But as she rounds a pillar, both she and her fiancé halt in surprise, because it’s occupied.

Sasuke beat them here.

Ino casts a startled look at Shikamaru, and he returns it, eyebrows lifted faintly in well-hidden astonishment. Because Sasuke beat them here, and is currently sitting in his usual seat with an extra chair pulled up next to him. That’s occupied as well, which is even more of a surprise, as is the fact that it’s someone familiar, but not one of the Twelve. Ino takes in the upswept blond hair, the ever-present mask, the short deep purple kimono over leggings and fishnet, and the Uzushio hitai-ate tied around one bicep, and wonders just when, exactly, Sasuke became so friendly with the Uzushio emissary.

Then Sasuke leans over even farther, and Youko leans in, and that’s…

That’s definitely a kiss. Ino blinks and replays the last few seconds in her mind.

A grin stretching across her face, she flounces over to the table and flings herself into her seat, beaming at her partner. “Oh, Sasuke. Why didn’t you tell me that all of that suspicion was just you covering up a crush?”

Sasuke splutters.
“Of course,” Ino continues blithely, because this is payback for ever rookie he’s ever made her babysit, “I probably should have guessed, right? Because he’s totally your type. I mean,” she waves a hand at the entirely bemused-looking Youko, encompassing the blond hair, lean build, and gymnast’s muscles, “he doesn’t just push you buttons, right, Sasuke-kun? He does the tango over them, and then the waltz for good measure. I'm surprised you didn’t drool the first time you saw him.”

Sasuke looks torn between the desire to bolt, the urge to whack his head against the tabletop a few times, and the overwhelming need to throttle Ino. “And I'm surprised,” he grits out, “that no one drowned you at birth.”

“Oi,” Shikamaru huffs, sliding into the chair next to Ino. He casts a glance at her, and she just grins back, lounging back in her chair and entirely content with how much of a rise she's managed to get out of the Uchiha.

“Defending my honor? That’s cute.” Ino leans forward to kiss Shikamaru’s cheek, and he rolls his eyes at her, even though there's a faint smile pulling at his lips. “Not that I need it, or should I go remind you of that?”

Shikamaru pulls a face. “You are never getting me on the sparring grounds with you again, woman. I still can't look Shizune in the face after last time.”

Were she in the mood to be merciful, Ino would let it go at that. But she’s never been a gracious winner, and inspects her nails with a smirk as she drawls, “Oh, don’t worry, Shika, I already told her the whole story. She knows.”

For a long moment, Shikamaru stares flatly at her. Ino just beams in response, and tosses a surreptitious wink to the laughing Youko. He grins back, and Sasuke looks to be debating whether or not to separate them for the good of mankind.

“Anyone else interested in story time?” Youko asks cheerfully, green eyes sparkling with wicked mirth, and Ino grins back even as the other two protest loudly.

“For this story? Always,” she promises. “Oh, hey, want to hear about the time Sasuke’s hair caught on fire? Or! How about the time he got hung up in one of Konohamaru’s traps? Or when Shika mistook the Lightning Country Daimyo’s wife for a—”

“NO,” Sasuke says.

“Yes,” Youko counters, and Ino gives Sasuke her sweetest smile. Three guesses who she’s going to listen to here.

“So,” she starts brightly, and Sasuke curses. Shikamaru groans and drops his head down to the table.

“Wake me when the nightmare ends,” he demands without looking up.

Ino just laughs. Because Sasuke brought someone, someone he’s interested in, a person who doesn’t know him but would clearly like to, and that’s a definite step in the right direction.

She can work with that.
An update one day early, because I like to keep you on your toes. :) Though as far as that goes, my work schedule looks to be changing, so I might be forced to change my update days as well. I'll let people know if that happens. Or, who knows, maybe I'll try to post twice a week instead. Yay motivation! \o/

Also, isn’t it amusing how the short little romantic comedy-ish thing I intended to be 24k words at most has somehow mutated into an 80k+ monster that looks to have at least ten more chapters? Ahahahaha, my life, I don’t even.

[Nocturne: A musical composition that has a romantic or dreamy character with nocturnal associations.]

It’s strange to see the people he once knew so well grown up and…changed. It’s equally as odd to sit in their midst and meet their eyes without so much as a hint of recognition crossing their expressions. Not entirely bad, perhaps, but just…strange.

They're all different in little ways, and the same in others. Hinata doesn’t stutter, and her hair is long, and Neji defers to her when they speak. Kiba is still brash and loud, but sports a long scar that neatly bisects the clan marking on his right cheek, and he’s given to thoughtful pauses now, moments of silence when before he never stopped. (He also twitches whenever Naruto and Sasuke kiss, and yeah, Naruto can see Sasuke’s point; it’s funny as hell.) Ino wears her effusiveness and good humor like a mask, teasing and poking and prodding, but always watchful, clearly picking up on undertones to the conversation that most people miss.

Seeing Sakura again was a bit of a shock, and Naruto had noticed how Sasuke tensed when she appeared, how his eyes slid to Naruto with something veiled behind them. He’s not the greatest at reading people, has never quite managed to master it in either lifetime, but that was easy enough to read. Insecurity and wariness, caution and reserve. So Naruto had made sure that his voice didn’t falter in his conversation with a calmly confident Tenten, had made sure that his glance didn’t linger when he looked at her to catalogue the changes.

The biggest is perhaps how she’s perched quite happily in Lee’s lap, trading barbs with Ino, barely glancing at Sasuke except as the conversation requires it, and grinning all the while. She’s happy, clearly, and it looks good on her. Naruto can look at her and feel gladness and nothing else, and hopes his raised eyebrow at Sasuke conveys as much.

Then he’s distracted as Tenten hauls out one of her larger sealing scrolls and dumps it on the table, eliciting several offended cries as people lunge for their endangered drinks.

“This,” she says, jabbing a finger at a portion of the seal and ignoring the rest of the table. “It keeps degrading after a few months, and I've already lost two good sets of kunai that way. I asked Toad Sage Jiraiya once, but he wanted nude pictures in return for helping me, so I'm pretty much out of luck.”

“He what?” Neji and Sasuke demand in unison. Neji in particular looks fit to skin someone, pale
eyes sharp and a muscle jumping in his jaw as he halfway rises.

Tenten raises a brow at him until Neji huffs under his breath and sinks down into his seat, then looks back at Naruto, who’s finding it very hard not to laugh. “Do I want to know what you did to him afterwards?” he asks, grinning, and she grins back.

“Well, he didn’t have to visit Tsunade-sama, at least,” she says judiciously, though her eyes are bright with mischief. “And he did compliment my fuinjutsu.”

Naruto laughs and leans forward to study the thick, bold lines of her seals. After a moment of contemplation, he reaches out and taps a line of marks that go straight when they should curve. “Here. This is inefficient, so the chakra you put into it is going nowhere and just dissipating. If you make it a match to this one here—” he traces what should be a mirrored array “—you’ll double your output, and at the same time solve your power problem.”

Tenten groans and rubs her temple. “I didn’t even think of that,” she mutters.

“Sealing is kind of Uzushio’s specialty,” Naruto says with a shrug. “It’s not something most people would see. And for seals done by someone not formally taught, learning outside of Uzushio? These are really good.”

“Hm.” With a faint frown, she studies the rest of the arrays, then sighs and rerolls the scroll. “I don’t suppose your Uzukage would be willing to take on exchange shinobi? ”

“Indeed!” Lee puts in with enthusiasm from where he’s leaning in to listen to their conversation. “I too would like to receive instruction in your youthful style of taijutsu! Gai-sensei always says one must seize opportunities with vigor and passion!”

“Lee! What have I told you about shouting in my ear?”

“Forgive me, my beautiful flower! I will endeavor to contain myself!”

Sakura rolls her eyes, but smiles and leans in to kiss his cheek. “It’s fine. Just remember your indoor voice.”

It’s the weirdest combination of dating and nannying that Naruto has ever seen, and he glances at Sasuke, fighting back a comment that is more than likely inappropriate. Sasuke just rolls his eyes, leans toward him, and murmurs, “At least she’s not a fangirl anymore, now that she’s moved on to… greener pastures.”

Naruto cackles before he can help it, surprised into genuine mirth rather than Youko's restrained chuckle, and has to double over, he’s laughing so hard. Sasuke just watches him, looking smug and amused as Naruto giggles and gasps for breath, hanging on to the Uchiha’s chair to stay upright. A moment later, Sasuke's hand closes around his, squeezing lightly, and Naruto tries to rein himself in, swallowing his laughter back and hoping he doesn’t get the hiccups. He isn’t entirely certain when Sasuke grew a sense of humor, but he likes it.

He likes it a lot.

“Bastard,” he says when he can speak again, wiping his eyes as he sinks back in his chair. “Don’t sneak up on me like that.”

“Hn.” Sasuke just looks eminently satisfied, and hooks a foot around one leg of Naruto's chair to tug it a touch closer. “It’s true.”
“But you don’t have to phrase it like that, jerk, it’s rude.”

“So is laughing.”

“Which is why that awful sense of humor you have should come with a warning label. And here I thought that stick up your ass didn’t leave any room for it, teme.”

Sasuke narrows his eyes at him, but can't quite hide the humor in them. “Warning labels only work when you can read, idiot. I fail to see how you’d benefit.”

With an offended huff, Naruto crosses his arms over his chest and narrows his eyes right back. “I’m the foremost expert on seals in all of Uzushiogakure. Excuse me, but what have you managed to accomplish in the last nineteen years?”

Silently, Sasuke points to the ANBU captain’s tattoo on his shoulder and gives Naruto an arch look. Naruto gives him his best unimpressed expression back, which lasts right up until Sasuke huffs a near-silent laugh, leans in, and fits their lips together through the barrier of the mask—a movement they’ve practiced more than once, over the course of the night. It’s quick and necessarily chaste, edged with the heat in Sasuke's eyes and the matching want that curls deep in Naruto's chest, and it’s only when they pull apart that Naruto realizes their corner of the bar has gone silent.

The ten other shinobi grouped around the table are all staring at them with varying degrees of disbelief. Hinata is slowly flushing, red climbing her cheeks beneath wide eyes, and next to her Kiba is slowly puffing up, looking somewhere between bewildered, outraged, and deeply offended. Sakura is dead-white, and Ino's eyes are narrow, her face set. Tenten and Lee trade glances, seemingly not quite sure where to look, and Neji is completely expressionless. Shino matches him, while Choji just looks worried and Shikamaru stares at them, steady and unavoidable.

“How about,” Ino says after a very, very long pause, “we move this party to Sasuke’s place.”

Despite the phrasing, it’s clearly not a question.

“I think that’s a good idea,” Sakura agrees after another moment, and rises to her feet like there's a thunderstorm brewing under her skin. Her green eyes are very hard. “Let’s go.” She vanishes in a whirl of leaves, and after a moment’s pause Ino murmurs something that sounds like an apology and does the same.

Neji is the next one to move, rising smoothly to his feet and offering Tenten a hand up. “We’ll walk with you,” he says, implacable, and nods for everyone else to get up. Kiba goes with a grumble, teeth halfway to bared as he steps away and stalks out of the bar. Shino and Hinata trade glances, and then Shino follows with quick steps, leave the Hyuuga heiress to pause next to Naruto’s chair.

“I would like it if we could all talk,” she says softly, not quite meeting his eyes. “It’s…been a long time.”

The sinking sensation in Naruto's chest feels rather like he swallowed a large rock, and he swallows hard and prays his voice doesn’t crack when he answers, “I—yeah. Let’s go.”

“Hn. Dobe,” Sasuke mutters, standing as well, but his eyes are sharp when he regards the others.

Chosji offers them a small smile as he joins Hinata. “You look like we’re going to your funeral,” he jokes. “It’s just a couple of drinks at Sasuke's place, Youko-san.”

That is, apparently, enough of a hint that Lee cries, “Yosh! We will test each other’s manliness in a drinking contest! If I lose, I will run fifty laps around the village on my thumbs!” He tacks on a wink
and a blinding nice-guy pose for effect.

With a huff, Tenten whacks him in the back of the head. “You’d better not be leaving the women out again,” she threatens, catching Neji by the hand and then Lee by the collar of his jumpsuit and dragging them out the door. “I’ll drink you both under the table, you chauvinist pigs.”

Shikamaru snorts softly, slouching up beside Naruto with his hands in his pockets and a sharp look well-hidden behind his habitual lethargy. “Come on,” he says with a jerk of his head. “If we’re not quick, Sakura will pick the lock and empty the liquor cabinet before we get there.”

Naruto winces and has to forcibly keep from rubbing a hand over the back of his head. “She’s going to punch me through a wall,” he mutters despondently, already anticipating the broken bones. ‘Hey, Kurama. How are you feeling?’

The fox snorts rudely. ‘Now who’s scared of a girl, brat?’

Naruto wisely lets it to.

“Not just you,” Sasuke reminds him with a grimace, but starts back towards his apartment nevertheless. Naruto falls into step with him, because with the way Hinata, Shikamaru, and Neji are watching him, if he tried to flee he’d get maybe four steps before they brought him down. Honestly, he feels a little like a criminal being escorted to the hangman’s noose. “She’s going to go after both of us.”

“Well,” Shikamaru puts in mildly, from about three inches to the left of Naruto’s elbow, “you were doing fairly well until you opened your mouths to insult each other.”

Naruto rolls his eyes, because of course that’s what would get him found out. “I didn’t think you’d notice!” he protests. “It was just…arguing.”

Shikamaru looks even more unimpressed than he usually does. “Sasuke has only ever argued with one person like that,” he points out, eyes restlessly scanning their surroundings. Neji gives him a look from up ahead, Byakugan activated, and nods faintly, and Shikamaru relaxes again. “Maybe next time you can save the bickering for when you’re married and not about to blow your cover.”

“There was no one watching us or listening in,” Shino says flatly, from where he’s walking next to an obviously fuming Kiba up ahead. “My kikaichū would have noticed.”

Naruto knows that Danzo doesn’t have anyone watching them at the moment—the nearest Root seal he can sense is about five streets over and pretty much stationary—and nods, tucking his hands into his sleeves for want of anything else to do with them. He’s…nervous. This isn’t how the night was supposed to go, though he supposes it was a bit much to ask to get through the gathering without anyone guessing his identity. Honestly, he’s never been very good at undercover work, especially when interacting with someone precious to him. And Sasuke…well. Sasuke really, really is.

“Oh, hell,” he sighs, rubbing a hand over his eyes as a thought occurs to him. Catching Sasuke’s raised brow, he grimaces and says, “Haku is going to kill me dead.”

Sasuke snorts, looking completely unsympathetic. The bastard.

“Someone should,” Kiba huffs, glaring back at them. He subsides when Hinata places a hand on his arm, though, and rolls his eyes before falling back to walk just in front of Shikamaru. “Uzushio, huh? That’s pretty far to run just ‘cause you failed the Chuunin Exams, moron.”

Naruto rolls his eyes right back. “There wasn’t an Uzushio until I left, dog-breath,” he retorts, and
then, when Akamaru barks indignantly, tacks on, “No offense, Akamaru.”

“Hey!” Kiba snarls, glaring at his dog and his friend equally. Sasuke makes a derisive sound, and Kiba obligingly whirls to glare at him, too. “And how did you find out, Uchiha? I assume it was before you started sticking your tongue down his throat at every available opportunity.”

“K-Kiba!” Hinata protests, flushing crimson.

Sasuke pointedly looks away, though Naruto can see the faint flush high up on his cheekbones. “Hn. I heard him laugh.”

There’s a long, long beat of silence, and then Neji snorts. Tenten giggles, and Shikamaru just sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose like all of them give him a migraine.

“Of course,” he mutters, sounding longsuffering. “How could I expect anything less from the man who stalked him for seven years? You are both so troublesome.”

Naruto grins, because he’s always enjoyed eliciting that reaction from the genius. Not that it’s overly hard, granted. “You hear that, Sasuke?” he asks brightly. “We’re moving up in the world.”

Sasuke raises a brow, though the slant of his mouth reads as amusement. “We are. From annoying to troublesome. That’s progress.”

“Hey! Maybe if we use him as a meat shield with Sakura we’ll even make it pain in the ass.”

“Try it and die,” Shikamaru threatens, going about two shades paler under his tan at the mere thought.

“My sweet, youthful flower is so strong and beautiful!” Lee puts in, whirling around in circles with his hands clasped under his chin and a rapturous look on his face. “She is the light and soul of Konoha, with the force to shatter mountains in her delicate and lovely hands!”

“Yes, yes,” Tenten mutters, catching him by the collar again and forcibly dragging him towards the door of Sasuke's building, and then up the stairs. “As you’ve said. Repeatedly. Every damn day since you met her.”

“Oh, my youthful teammate! Do not feel jealous, for the fire of Konoha burns brightly in you as well, even if you are not—urk!”

Neji prudently steps in before his partner can finish strangling their teammate. “Tenten, he’s turning purple.”

“Oh, what a pity. It’ll clash with his jumpsuit.” Tenten smiles sweetly, but allows Neji to pry her fingers off of the twisted fabric without protest.

“What doesn’t?” Kiba asks dryly.

“You're all so slow,” Ino calls, sticking her head out of Sasuke's apartment to wave them on. “Come on, we got some more supplies.” She disappears back inside, leaving the door swinging open behind her.

Shikamaru mutters to himself, pinching the bridge of his nose again. “Equal odds for them having cleaned out the liquor store or T&I’s stash of torture implements,” he warns with wry amusement, and leads the way inside. The rest of the Konoha Twelve troop in on his heels, and leave Naruto and Sasuke standing alone in the hall.
“Too late to run?” Naruto asks without much hope.

“Seven years too late,” Sasuke informs him without an ounce of pity, and pulls him along.

As soon as the door closes, he lets go, all but diving to the side, and Naruto barely has time to brace himself before he goes flying back into the thick oak, which creaks and trembles dangerously but doesn’t give way. His head is spinning, his ears are ringing, and his entire face aches like he just went one-on-one with Kurama, but somewhere beyond all of that he hears a sniffle, a sob, and then his arms are full of Sakura.

“You are a jerk,” she hisses at him. “Naruto, I thought you were dead! And now you're back and sneaking around the village?! How could you?!”

“What she said,” Kiba echoes, crossing his arms over his chest and narrowing his eyes. Unfortunately for him, Naruto finds it somewhat less than intimidating after his face was just reacquainted Sakura’s fist.

“Sorry,” he says, meeting the eyes studying him in turn and smiling helplessly. “I'm sorry, but I promise it was for a good reason.” With a glance to check that his privacy seals on the windows are still working, he reaches up and tugs his mask down, letting it hang loose around his neck. “But I guess that since things are almost over with, it’s okay that you know now. Not great, because Haku is going to murder me, but as long as you don’t say anything it’ll be fine.”

“It’s not a prank,” Neji says evenly, leaning back against the wall and looking considering. Hinata glances at him quickly, and he tips his head to her. “He’s serious. If this were a prank, it would be up now, found out. But between the disguise and the way he came in through the eastern gates with Uchiha this morning after there was extended fighting in the western forest, it’s enough to see something is going on.”

“Hopefully not for much longer,” Naruto puts in, forcibly injecting lightness into his tone. “Like I said, it’s almost over. You guys don’t have to worry about it.”

“Ouch! Sakura-chan! What was that for?”

“You idiot!” Sakura plants her hands on her hips and glares at him. “Of course we’re going to worry! And if you don’t at least tell us what’s going on, or better yet let us help you, I will show you just how much I’ve learned about the human body since you left, Naruto.”

Naruto raises his hands to fend her off, backpedaling and quickly ducking behind Sasuke for cover. “All right! All right, I’ll tell you! But Sakura, it’s dangerous.” He meets her furious eyes, trying to convey just how serious he is with a look. “It’s…really dangerous.”

Sasuke’s hand curls around his elbow, not squeezing, just holding. It’s a comfort either way. “Naruto’s right,” he says grimly, not quite looking at anyone else. “The man we’re going after had my entire clan killed. Are you willing to risk your families so easily?”

The silence stretches, hard and brittle and sharp enough to draw blood if broken, like hair-thin strands of glass.

And then Kiba, brash and impetuous and always ready to dive headfirst into danger, huffs out an offended breath and shakes his head. “I’d like to see him try going after the Inuzuka Clan,” he growls. “I'm in.”

“Or the Hyuuga,” Hinata adds softly, but her voice is silk just barely hiding a spine of unyielding steel as she meets Neji’s eyes across the room.
“Branch House and Main House stand united,” he affirms, inclining his head in agreement.

“You can't really expect us to stay out of this, Naruto,” Choji says, gentle but determined as he holds Naruto's gaze, and Naruto feels a flicker in his chest, warmth and fondness for a boy who once shared lunches with him when only a handful of children would so much as speak to him.

“If it’s someone in Konoha, they must be dealt with,” Shino agrees, pushing his dark glasses further up his nose. “Why? Because if he has already had a whole clan murdered, he will be a threat regardless of whether we know of him or not. It is better to be forewarned.”

“If he has enough clout to get a genius like Uchiha Itachi to massacre his family, he’s well-placed,” Ino says, pale blue eyes narrowing as she crosses her arms. She exchanges glances with Shikamaru, who looks troubled, and then lifts her chin. “There are Yamanaka Clan members in every division of T&I. If we haven’t managed to catch this traitor yet, as the next Clan Head and the head of the Intelligence Division when Ibiki retires, I'm duty-bound to see to it. Shika?”

“Troublesome,” the genius mutters, though Naruto can't quite tell if he means her or the situation. “My father missed this as well. Like Ino, this is my duty as the heir to the Nara Clan.”

“If Team 10 and Team 8 are doing this, I guess I might as well declare Team 9 a go,” Tenten says with faint amusement. “I'm an orphan, so it's not like they can go after my family.”

“Or mine,” Lee adds, squaring his shoulder. “Yosh! Team 9 is in!”

“And Team 7,” Sakura finishes firmly, crossing her arms and giving Sasuke and Naruto both a blistering glare even though they don’t attempt to argue. “That’s eleven of the strongest jounin and tokubetsu jounin in Konoha, and one…” She trails off, studying Naruto guardedly for a moment. “You did get promoted, didn’t you?”

“Hey!” Naruto yelps, deeply wounded. “What's with that skepticism? I outrank all of you, thanks!”

“Someone,” Sasuke puts in, sounding entirely too amused, “thought it would be a good idea to make him Uzukage.”

“Teme!” Naruto cries in mock offense, punching Sasuke in the shoulder, and trying his best not to grin at the sight of ten of Konoha’s top shinobi left absolutely speechless.

When Tsunade finally manages to drag herself back into her office after a meeting with the Academy teachers that ran on far too long, she’s absolutely exhausted and close to seeing double, and wants nothing so much as a good, stiff drink. Unfortunately, though, there are still forms that need to be filed, notes that need to be expanded on, new lesson plans that need to be approved, and several hours of worrying to be done over the fact that she has yet to hear anything from Jiraiya or even Orochimaru. With that in mind, she pushes the door open with a weary sigh and steps in, only to stop dead in her tracks.

There’s a white gyrfalcon, one of the birds native to the eastern coast—and, specifically, to Uzushio, where they’ve always been favored as messengers—perched dead-center in the middle of her desk, watching its surroundings with fiercely intelligent golden eyes. It stares at her for a long moment, assessing, and then bobs its head and vanishes in a puff of smoke.

A summons, then, Tsunade thinks, quickly crossing the room to find out what it brought. People generally only use summons to carry important things, because they’re too proud to take on such duties without good reason. And, indeed, there’s a sealing scroll on top of her paperwork. It opens
easily with a touch of her chakra, and the very first word makes the breath catch hard and tight in her chest.

*Baa-chan*, it says.

Well. If someone wanted to get her attention, they have it.

_You're not going to want to believe this, but you have to. You remember when Uzushio was destroyed, I'm sure. Now you're the one who can make sure that it never happens again._

It’s not signed, but Tsunade doesn’t need a signature to know who it’s from.

With her heart in her throat, she activates the privacy seals on her office, then bites her thumb to draw blood and smears it across the scroll’s seal. When the whirl of smoke clears, there's a neat stack of folders in front of her, labeled in a familiar hand.

Not Naruto's, even though the note was his. Interesting.

Something tells her that her night just got a whole lot longer, and that soon she’ll *really* need that sake. To go to these lengths to bring something to her attention and no one else’s—

There's absolutely no way this can be good news.

Taking a deep breath and setting her jaw, Tsunade flips open the topmost file and starts to read.

(She’s wrong.

It’s not just “not good”.

It’s the kind of thing that will shake Konoha to its very foundations.)
Chapter Notes

This is short because it’s an optional chapter. If gratuitous smut’s not your thing, I’ll have the next chapter up in a few days, and you can skip this and spare your eyeballs. If it is, this one’s all yours. It’s literally 3k-ish words of kissing, groping, feelings, and porn, I'm not kidding.

[Intlude: A piece of instrumental music played between scenes in a play or opera.]

The late night slides into a late morning, and Sasuke is more than happy to spend the handful of extra hours afforded by his lack of duties catching up on his sleep. Before, without anything scheduled in-village, he would have headed straight up to Tsunade's office to hound her for missions as far from Konoha as possible—anything to further his search for Naruto.

Now, with Naruto in the next room over, having laid claim to his couch, Sasuke feels no such need. The rest of the Konoha Twelve had left late, having drunk their way through Sasuke's emergency stash of liquor and then the entirety of what Sakura and Ino had picked up. Sasuke had, for once, managed to keep himself to ‘slightly tipsy’ rather than ‘all-out wasted’, and had felt great and vindictive pleasure imagining each of his comrades’ hangovers as he showed them to the door.

It’s only himself and Naruto now, and Sasuke feels a little shaken knowing that it’s not some sort of mad dream, some hallucination brought on by Sakura following through with one of her more frequent threats and drugging him to make him rest.

But this isn’t just a touch of madness slipping though; the others saw Naruto just as clearly as Sasuke does, interacted with him and talked with him and hit him and hugged him. He’s here, he’s real, and this is the culmination of nearly seven years of searching.

Naruto is here. Naruto is with him, in the sense that Sasuke is entirely allowed to lean in and steal kisses when he likes. It’s not even stealing—Naruto doesn’t seem to mind, returns each kiss with all the desperation Sasuke could ever hope for, and it makes Sasuke a little wild to think of what could have happened if Naruto had stayed, or if Sasuke had gone with him. They could have had seven years of this closeness, these kisses. They’ve never been good at being friends, the two of them—always something extra, something more. Rivals and opposites and mirrored souls, storm-wind and lightning-strike and two orphans Fortune laughed at, when they presented themselves to her.

Better luck next life, she must have told them, Sasuke thinks. Try again, suckers.

He opens his eyes in the faint light that slips through the curtains and rolls onto his back, stretching carefully. His mouth is a little dry, but beyond that there are no aftereffects from a night of drinking. He’d been careful, after all—Naruto had told him, after one of Kiba’s less subtle attempts at refilling his glass yet again, that the Kyuubi’s healing kept him from getting drunk, and Sasuke had decided that he wanted to face the morning with dignity, especially if Naruto was going to be sober enough to laugh at him.

In the main room, whisper-soft steps pad across the floor, pause by the window, and then return, and Sasuke sighs softly, rubbing a hand over his face. Naruto is…not quite pacing, but prowling, too
restless to sleep or sit still or even stand in one place for long, and he’s been that way since early this morning. It’s a low sort of background noise clinging to the edge of Sasuke's senses, a shinobi’s instinct to track movement even though the threat has been dismissed.

Naruto is on edge, and Sasuke can't blame him. Sasuke's summons reported back before they left for the bar, assuring them that Tsunade had seen and accepted the scroll, and now all that’s left to do is wait for her reaction. Sasuke has wondered, privately, why Naruto—a Kage, a fuinjutsu master, the host of the Kyuubi no Kitsune, and the second coming of the Storm God—doesn’t just confront Danzo himself and get things over with. It’s what Sasuke would do, because that’s how he’s wired. Revenge and vengeance are things he understands, even though he doesn’t allow himself to default to them any longer.

But Naruto is seeking justice, not vengeance, and that’s something entirely different and far more complicated. At the same time, he’s balancing the newly-reformed diplomatic ties between Konoha and Uzushio, and for all his deeds Danzo is first and foremost a citizen of Konoha. More of his schemes have effected Konoha shinobi than any others, even taking Uzushio into account. Assassination attempts on the Sandaime, indoctrinating Orochimaru into Root and twisting him further, arranging the deaths of Jiraiya's students and driving him from the village, preventing backup from reaching Kato Dan in time to save him and forcing Tsunade to leave, preventing the Uchiha from helping during the Kyuubi attack, advocating their confinement in a separate district, Itachi—

There’s so much, and Uzushio was a tragedy, a massacre for all that the village fought back. But it was only one manipulation out of a string of them, one move on the chess board. Danzo has so much more to answer for.

And it’s all out of their hands now.

Naruto makes another circuit of the living room, turns, and backtracks, and Sasuke rolls his eyes, mutters a creative curse, and slides out of bed. Cat-quiet in bare feet and a pair of loose pyjama pants, he pads out to the main room and leans against the doorframe, raising a brow. Naruto is already dressed, minus his mask and contacts and his belled kanzashi, and the sight of him in his distinctly Uzushio clothing, with his eyes impossibly blue and his blond hair tumbling down around his shoulders, just about steals Sasuke's breath.

It’s Naruto. After seven years without, that will never not be amazing.

But, even if it’s not orderly enough to be pacing, Naruto's circuits of the room aren’t doing anything but putting them both further on edge. Sasuke sighs softly to himself and then raises his voice. “Oi. Dobe. There's nothing we can do until Tsunade decides something. You know that.” There’s no answer, and he rolls his eyes. “Dobe.”

“If you don’t stop calling me that, I'm going to take you out to one of the training grounds and show you in great detail just how much of a dead last I'm not.” Naruto threatens crossly, turning away from the window to glare at Sasuke, and that at least is familiar, easy. Understandable. “Just what part of Uzukage is so hard for you to comprehend, teme?”

“Three syllable words not related to food? I'm impressed,” Sasuke arches an imperious brow, and he can practically see the tension roiling under Naruto's skin, the storm he’s named for building to nearly explosive levels even without Sasuke's intervention. “Or did you read that on the back of a ramen cup?”

Naruto's growl is sub-vocal, low and threatening until he cuts it off with an irritated hiss and spins away, stalking back to the window with his hands fisted. Even seven years and rebuilding and then running an entire village hasn’t improved his patience, it seems.
“Sasuke,” he huffs, dragging his hands through his hair in clear aggravation. “If you're trying to pick a fight, stop it. Even if it’s just a spar, I can’t. My control’s so low I’ll call up a hurricane and totally blow my cover. Again.”

“Hn.” Sasuke considers this for a moment, considers the tension wound tight through the other man’s shoulders, the nearly bestial agitation twisted into every muscle, and reaches out to snag his wrist as he stalks by. Naruto reacts like it’s an attack, but with the benefit of surprise on his side, Sasuke is quicker. He turns, ducks the punch that comes flying at his head, pins Naruto to the wall, and slams their mouths together.

It’s about as far from smooth as is physically possible, their teeth clacking painfully together and the angle awkward and Naruto still stiff with shock. But then Naruto huffs out a sound somewhere between a sigh and a laugh, tilts his head, and opens his mouth, and Sasuke lets out a breath of relief as everything smooths out. Naruto is warm against him, and his mouth is hot and wet and hard and soft, and it tastes like desperation and something like happiness, even if Sasuke has little enough of that to compare it with. He loosens his grip on Naruto’s wrist, lets the blond turn his hand until their fingers mesh and grip, and slides his other hand to Naruto’s hip. Naruto makes a sound, soft and interested, and his own hand curves around Sasuke’s bare shoulder and then skims down to the small of his back, pulling him a step closer even though there’s barely room between them.

Sasuke follows that hand, though, moves with it and steps right between Naruto’s legs until they’re as close as they can possibly be, pressed together from the thighs up. This close, Naruto is hot, and Sasuke can feel every line and dip of his body, the hard planes of an active shinobi and the curve of musculature he wants to study in great detail, even though the mere thought of removing his mouth from Naruto’s is physically painful. The fingers on his back tighten, making him gasp into Naruto’s mouth, and Sasuke growls in answer, nipping at Naruto’s lower lip and then diving forward again, as if he’s trying to eat him from the mouth down. Their tongues tangle, twist, and Sasuke never understood the appeal of kissing like this, before, but he does now. Because he wants everything, everything Naruto has to give and more besides, wants it all and wants it forever.

Before he even consciously considers it, his hand is at the hem of Naruto’s short kimono, sliding beneath it and up the back of Naruto’s thigh, and that gets him an intriguing squirm and huff of breath. Sasuke smirks against Naruto’s mouth and tips his head, lips sliding over the line of his jaw and nipping softly, even as his hand moves higher, reaching the top of the leggings and finding smooth, heated skin. With a low sound like a growl, Naruto tightens his grip on Sasuke’s left hand and hooks his free fingers in the hem of Sasuke’s sleep pants, nails just grazing one hipbone. It’s a flare of sensation that should be practically nothing, but Sasuke feels it like a firecracker under his skin, like he’s suddenly hypersensitive in a way only extremely dangerous missions usually make him, and he hisses sharply, his hand clenching on Naruto’s waist.

Another kiss, harder than before, with an edge of teeth the others lacked, and Sasuke lets his hand drop. It gets him a sharp noise, not a whine but almost, from the blond, and he doesn’t even bother to strangle a hum of satisfaction, biting at the inside of Naruto’s lip before the other man pulls away a little, breath hot over Sasuke’s teeth as he leans into him even more. Teeth close delicately on Sasuke’s earlobe, and he jerks, another cluster of nerves he’s never even thought about flaring and sending heat streaking down his spine. In answer he scores his teeth over Naruto’s neck, making him cry out, loud in the heated hush between them.

The wave-patterned obi falls away, easily undone by desperate fingers, and Sasuke presses his hand flat over Naruto’s abs, scraping lightly with his nails and savoring the groan it gets him. Naruto isn’t built like Kiba, all muscle, or like Lee, all long lines. He’s a little stockier for all that he’s wiry, with a core of strength gained not through focused workouts but movement and doing. It’s a little addicting, a little captivating, and Sasuke kind of never wants to stop touching him.
Naruto's fingers drag up his back, leaving a path of fire behind them, and curl around the nape of his neck, pulling him in again. Sasuke takes that to mean Naruto feels the same way. The fishnet shirt doesn’t leave a lot of room to maneuver, and as skimpy a barrier as it is, Sasuke loathes it with a hatred disproportionate to its crimes. He gets his fingers under its edge and pulls hard, wrenching it up, and Naruto laughs against his mouth. Sasuke grunts in answer, too satisfied with the suddenly uncovered skin to care, and then gasps as calloused fingers brush over a nipple, hesitate, and do it again. In retaliation, he dips down and nips at Naruto’s collarbone, applying teeth and pressure and leaving a bright red patch of skin behind him when he moves on to lay a kiss over the curve of Naruto's throat. Another press forward, and suddenly it occurs to him that Naruto is hard, right up against Sasuke's own answering erection, and the thought leaves him breathless and dazed, his head spinning beyond what the influence of bare golden skin and a hot-wet mouth have already caused.

But not completely. Not enough to entirely steal his reason. Sasuke pulls away, puts the bare inch that’s all he can stand between them, and says almost desperately, “Naruto, is this all right?” Naruto blinks back at him, blond hair falling wild and disheveled around his face, blue eyes a little stunned. A breath, a heartbeat, and he shakes himself visibly, closing his eyes and swallowing before he looks back up to meet Sasuke's gaze.

“I want this,” Sasuke says, when the silence stretches too long. A ragged breath in and out, and he leans in to rest his forehead against Naruto's, no matter how tempting it is to be so close to that kiss-bruised mouth. His voice is more roughly honest than he intends it to be when he adds, “I want this, and if you do too, I won't stop. At any minute we’re going to be facing a man who had your entire village and my entire clan killed, and I don’t want to risk never having had this at all. But if you're not ready, or want to wait—”

Naruto's fingers against his lips cut him off, and he stops. Naruto smiles back at him, blue eyes crinkling and so breathtakingly warm it aches like a kick in the chest. “Before you go any further down that line of thought, I should warn you, Sasuke,” he says with a wry tilt to his mouth, though his gaze is serious and steady. “There is nothing in me that is capable of casual. Not in anything else, and definitely not in this.” It takes a moment for the pieces to connect, for Sasuke to realize what Naruto is saying, and then he can't help the sharp huff of laughter that escapes him. Can't help the way his hand curls, possessive and greedy, around Naruto's side and grips tightly. “Idiot. I've been chasing you for seven years, Naruto,” he answers with amusement. “What the hell makes you think that just catching you is even remotely enough to satisfy me?”

Naruto laughs like it's been startled out of him, warm and bright and soft. He’s still smiling when Sasuke leans in again, kisses him like he's drowning and Naruto is his air. Naruto's hand is sliding down again, tracing muscles and gripping the waistband of his pants, sliding under it, and never one to be outmatched, Sasuke does the same. He pushes Naruto's leggings down, his underwear, and closes his fingers around flesh that’s even hotter. Naruto gasps into his mouth, sets his teeth against Sasuke's lips, and returns the favor. Sasuke grunts like it's been torn out of him, because he doesn’t even touch himself often, has taken a bare handful of partners ever, and the sensation of someone else’s hand—Naruto's hand—on him is enough to kill all higher function in his brain in one fell swoop.

It’s different, touching and being touched. When he did this with someone else, it was just a little above masturbation in his book, hardly worth the effort of seeking it out. But with Naruto, it's lightning down his spine and fire in his veins, each glancing touch of fingertips or palm curled
around him something to shake him to his very core. Naruto explores, takes his time, touches like he’s solving a mystery, like every time Sasuke gasps or thrusts into his grip is one more piece of the puzzle. It shakes Sasuke, weaken his knees and leaves him panting, and he tightens his grip on Naruto's cock almost reflexively, but it gets him a cry and buck of Naruto's hips as their kiss turns open-mouthed and entirely sloppy.

Another cry as Sasuke twists his hand, swipes a thumb over the weeping head, and Naruto shudders in his arms, gasps for breath against his lips, and that along with a sharp pull of Naruto's hand almost undoes him. Heat is building in his gut, pooling at the base of his spine as lightning sparks being his eyes, but he can't look away, won't. Naruto is beautiful like this, wild and needful and unabashed, coming apart beneath and against him, crying out and tipping his head back as Sasuke presses forward, knocks his fingers away, and takes them both in one hand. The bare curve of Naruto's throat draws him, and his head is spinning too much for anything like a controlled kiss, but he presses his mouth against it, twists his hand around their cocks, and doesn’t even bother fighting for control.

Hard-hot skin, just slick enough with precome, a grip just tight enough to make them both cry out, and that’s the end of it. Sasuke closes his eyes, breathes in the smell of sea-wind and sunshine, and lets it out in a gasp as he comes. He barely registers it when Naruto goes stiff against him half a heartbeat later, crying out Sasuke's name in a way he promises himself he’ll be smug about later, and then slumps back against the wall, loose-limbed and panting.

Sasuke's legs decide then that they're taking a break, and he only barely manages to turn his wobble into a controlled slide to the floor, bringing an un-protesting Naruto with him. They lean together, trying to recover their equilibrium for a long moment, and then Naruto blows out a long, slow breath.

“Wow,” he mutters, tipping his head to grin lazily at Sasuke. Sasuke looks at him, cheeks flushed, blue eyes dazed, hair a mess, with red marks blooming on his throat and collarbone, and can't help but echo the sentiment.

“Hn,” he grunts, stupidly pleased and ridiculously happy, but that’s the closest he’s going to come to words for a while yet. Still, there's enough left in him to tilt forward and hide a grin in the curve of Naruto's shoulder when the blond laughs at him.

Fingers card through his hair, deft and gentle, and Sasuke relegates all thought of moving to a later time. Much, much later, if he has anything to say about it.

Definitely better than picking a fight any day.
I apologize for the delay, but work snuck up on me from behind and took me down without mercy. Three sixteen-hour days in a row don’t leave a lot of time for writing. Or, you know, breathing.

[Counterpoint: Two or three melodic lines played at the same time, combining a number of individual but harmonizing melodies.]

Capriccioso: Capriciously, in an unpredictable or volatile style.]

Tsunade barely pauses long enough to knock before she’s throwing the door open and storming inside, letting it rebound off the wall with an almighty bang and slam closed behind her. The Uchiha is already on his feet, sword in hand and eyes narrowed, but Tsunade ignores him in favor of staring at the room’s other occupant. He’s also standing, a long naginata braced in front of him and his mask pulled up, a bottle of honing oil and a whetstone discarded at his feet, but the look in his eyes isn’t Sasuke’s, wary and on edge.

No, Youko's eyes are anticipatory, expectant. He stares back at her like he already knows what she’s going to say.

Tsunade takes a breath and crossed her arms over her chest, flicking a glance at Sasuke before turning her gaze back to the Uzushio messenger. “How interesting,” she says evenly. “I went to look for you at the inn, Youko-san, and imagine my surprise when an ANBU informed me that the best place to find you would be one of my top jounin’s quarters.”

Youko doesn’t flinch, but Sasuke straightens, his eyes hard as he slides his sword away. “I was furthering diplomatic relations with a traditional ally,” he says a touch stiffly.

Tsunade takes in the Uchiha’s distinct lack of shirt, the faint bruise on his neck, the way Youko's kimono is ever so slightly askew, and the tangled blond hair. Then she snorts loudly. “Is that what they’re calling it these days?” she asks dryly, and is rewarded with a flush creeping up pale cheeks before Sasuke whips his head around to stare pointedly at the wall.

“Hn.”

The sharp thud of the metal-capped butt of the naginata striking the floor pulls Tsunade's attention away from torturing her ANBU captain, and she looks over to see Youko has planted his weapon on the wood, and is leaning casually on it. He doesn’t fool her, though: those green eyes are one half-step shy of wild.

“If you were looking for me, Hokage-sama,” he says politely, “you’ve found me.”

“Hm.” Tsunade studies him for a moment, then glances over at Sasuke. “Uchiha, assemble your team and meet in my office. Top secret, and don’t let anyone detain or question you but myself or Shikaku.”

She halfway expects him to protest, or turn to Youko before he leaves, but instead something very
like satisfaction settles in the lines of his face. With a sharp nod, Sasuke turns and disappears into his bedroom, and barely thirty seconds later his presence is gone from the apartment. Tsunade is left alone with a ghost of a man she once knew, a specter from a city that should be dead, and a man with secrets more dangerous than any she’s encountered in decades.

Restraining the urge to rub her temples, Tsunade fixes him with a sharp look. “Generally, Uzumaki, messengers deliver all of their messages at the same time. It saves a lot of people a vast amount of confusion, don’t you think?”

To his credit, Youko doesn’t pretend not to know what she’s talking about. He favors her with a half-smile just barely visible beneath his mask, and instead says, “I can track his agents, if you’d like. I can even immobilize them, if only temporarily, using that seal he put on them.”

Tsunade doesn’t even want to consider what’s going to happen to the dozens of traumatized, high-level shinobi who have been at Danzo’s mercy since childhood. It’s hardly something she can ignore, the need to deprogram and reintegrate them, but…she’s putting it off for the moment at least. One migraine-inducing disaster at a time.

“Can you?” she asks, refocusing her attention on the matter at hand, and the idea of Danzo’s troops out of commission is a tempting one. It would make all of this far, far easier.

That gets her another crinkling of his eyes, hinting at a hidden smile. “I came along on this mission for several reasons, Hokage-sama, only one of which is my mostly adequate grasp of diplomacy.”

Tsunade wonders if Youko is even aware of how much he’s giving away right now, though considering the tightly bottled tension in every muscle she rather doubts it. Came along on, instead of was sent on. It’s another clue, another piece in the puzzle that makes up Uzushio’s return, but now isn’t the time to consider it. She crosses her arms over her chest, turning the offer over in her mind, and asks, “All of them?”

Youko nods, fingers tracing lightly over the shaft of his naginata—a familiar one, now that Tsunade is looking closely. Arashi’s naginata by its many intricate seals, treasured and much-used, though she can’t quite recall its name. Yet another puzzle piece. “They have a seal on their tongues to keep them silent,” he says. “It’s a fairly simple one, though, and I can create a master seal that will link to each Root member through the arrays’ sympathetic resonance. Any change to the main seal will be reflected by the smaller ones, and it will be easy enough to shift a silence seal into one for sleep.”

Tsunade is good with seals—she’s one of the best still living, along with Jiraiya and Orochimaru—but the way Uzushio nin talk about seals, have always talked about seals, is something beyond even her grasp. Even her great-uncle Tobirama, who combined ninjutsu and seals flawlessly in ways no one else thought to, drew most of his ideas from Uzushio and their incredibly complex, beautiful fuinjutsu.

There was a toymaker, she remembers, in the market when she went to see Arashi’s Jounin Exam. He’d smiled at her, drawn a few bold, sweeping lines on a carved phoenix puppet, and brought it to life with a flare of chakra. It had danced for her, bowed and fluttered and stepped gracefully across the stand, all because of some ink and lines.

Puppetry is Suna’s art, but seals are Uzushio’s, and far more adaptable, far more widespread there than puppetry has ever become in Wind Country. If Youko is so certain he can do this, Tsunade has no reason to doubt him, especially after what Danzo arranged for his country. That he didn’t simply take his revenge, that no one from Uzushio has invaded yet to claim their pound of flesh, speaks well to their future alliance and Uzushio’s willingness to compromise, even in such important matters.
“What do you need?” she asks, and the spark in Youko's eyes becomes a wildfire, a hurricane.

“Somewhere central,” he says, and there’s a reverberation to his voice that isn’t entirely human, is something more. Not quite a growl, but…an echo. An undertone of power like Tsunade has never heard before. “It doesn’t have to be the exact center of the village, but—somewhere high, with a line of sight that includes most of Konoha.”

The decision of whether to trust or not has passed. Without hesitation, Tsunade nods her agreement. “You’ll be in the Hokage's office with me. Do you have your supplies with you, or should I send a runner for them?”

The naginata drops to rest casually over Youko’s shoulder as he heads for the door, sliding his sandals on. “I have everything with me, Hokage-sama. Lead the way.”

Tsunade does so without hesitating. Plans are already in place and time is tight. Originally, she’d thought to take Youko into custody, if only temporarily, so that he wouldn’t interfere with Danzo's capture. But this could work out even better, if everything goes smoothly. Neji and Sasuke are both leading teams in, and with the Byakugan and Sharingan both activated there's only a slim chance of them triggering some sort of self-destruct on Danzo's documents and labs. With all of the Root ANBU out of commission, there's far less of a chance that one of them will manage to hit a kill switch.

There's already enough blood on Danzo's hands—enough Konoha blood, which is entirely unforgivable. She isn’t about to let him add to it. This is what had Orochimaru banished—through his own fault, certainly, but with Danzo pushing him along. This is what forced her into self-imposed exile. This is what destroyed the Uchiha, has been twisting orphans and talented clan children for decades, in direct defiance of the Hokage's orders. Even if she were inclined to be merciful—which, after even a brief summary of Danzo's training methods, she is most definitely not—Tsunade would be obligated by her position, her authority, to put a stop to this.

Danzo fancies himself the lord of Konoha's darkness, some twisted sort of shadow Hokage. Tsunade isn’t about to let that go. Can't, won't, could never. That’s not the kind of Hokage she is, or the kind of leader Sarutobi or her grandfather would want her to be.

Youko is humming softly as he walks beside her, an old tune she recognizes as an Uzushio ballad, and over his shoulder the blade of his weapon catches the noon light and shimmers a ghostly blue. His eyes are blazing, determination and fire and eagerness all twisted up in razor-edged knots, and she can almost feel the air ripple around him, like killing intent tightly leashed. He’s waiting, but only just, allowing Konoha the first shot at their own traitor. But Tsunade has no doubt at all that if Danzo slips through their hands, Youko will be standing by, and he’ll be absolutely merciless.

Sāji, she thinks suddenly, watching the grey-and-blue tassel sway where it hangs just beneath the blade’s cross-guard. Surge. That’s what Arashi called it. He and Sarutobi had been well-matched, when they faced off against each other, naginata and staff, fire and water, earth and wind, but Arashi had borne Sāji even more faithfully than Sarutobi had his staff. The Sandaime Uzukage had carried it everywhere, from his days as a genin on, and Tsunade can't believe that anyone in Uzushio but Arashi himself would willingly bear the naginata again. His people loved him too much, held him in too high a regard to let someone else walk around with his favored weapon.

And if that’s the case…

The pieces connect.

She knows that Uzushio was always called the Village of Longevity, but she’s never really thought
about it before. Never considered what it might mean, combined with an Uzumaki’s chakra reserves. After all, Mito looked young right up until she died, and though Tsunade only ever met Arashi face to face a handful of times, Sarutobi often complained about how Arashi always made him look old—even more so later in life. At the time, Tsunade had thought he was referring to Arashi’s energy, his enthusiasm.

But what if he wasn’t?

What was it Jiraiya had said, when the subject was raised? *He’d be over seventy right now, and as much as I admired Sensei’s drive, I don’t think a man of his age would have been able to rebuild his village from rubble after witnessing its destruction. And I don’t think even the Storm God managed to attain immortality.* But maybe—maybe it wasn’t immortality, per se. Maybe it was just long life. Longer than normal even for someone from Uzushio, perhaps, but the Storm God was always strong, always unfailingly brilliant with seals and ninjutsu and spur-of-the-moment tactics.

It’s a possibility Tsunade can’t dismiss, that this man walking beside her is the same one whom she watched at his Jounin Exams so many years ago. The same one who saw his city fall because of Danzo’s machinations, who had to watch as his people scattered and were lost.

Tsunade takes a deep breath and opens the door of her office, ushering Youko—Arashi, most likely—inside. She closes her eyes, takes half a moment to pray that Danzo will be captured neatly and without a fuss, for all their sakes, and then steps in as well and shuts the door gently but firmly behind her.

Nine ANBU turn to look at her, all of them masked and armed to the teeth, and she summons up every last ounce of her convictions and nods grimly.

“You have your orders. Go,” she commands, and in a dark blur they’re gone.

Tsunade breathes out and turns to face the window.

Sometimes, to keep the tree healthy, one has to prune back the unnecessary roots. It’s simple but crucial, and these particular roots have been left to fester and grow unchecked for far too long.

*Necessary,* Tsunade thinks, and doesn’t allow herself to close her eyes. She thinks of children, of clans, of an entire Hidden Village put to the sword, and doesn’t waver.

*Cut back the roots. Preserve the tree. Drag the shadows out into the light and burn them away.*

Tsunade is a grim and silent presence behind him, but Naruto forces himself to ignore her, concentrates all of his attention on the here and now. Because this is it, this is the final move before checkmate, the half-step before the king is toppled. This is restitution and justice, this is all of Danzo's misdeeds brought to light. He closes his eyes and thinks of Uzushio, how it was before, and perhaps the blame isn’t Danzo’s alone—Kiri was the sword that struck, after all, but Danzo was the hand that drew and wielded it, the reason it slipped past their shield and buried itself deep.

His hands don’t shake, though it almost feels like they should as he reaches into his obi and draws out Mio’s kanzashi. The bells chime softly, gently, like her laughter once did, as he twists his hair up and slides the sticks into place.

*Arashi-kun! Wait, wait, you'll never get anywhere with your hair in your face like that!*

(He’s never forgotten her words, lighthearted as they were, given with laughter and gift made by her
There are so many memories, crowding to the fore. Mio and Yui and Shunka, Ginrei in his hospital and the Nidaime Uzukage smiling at him, Mito watching him with fierce, fierce eyes, the sea at dawn and the marketplace at noon and a hundred thousand tiny things all lost to the tides of time. Good and bad, because Naruto knows by now that there's never just one or the other. Like Kagami, and maybe after this, after Danzo has paid his dues, Naruto will be able to think of his friend without thinking of a lonely death far from anywhere at the hands of those who should have been his allies.

He spreads a scroll out on the ground, two feet square and marked with the beginnings of the seal he needs. It's possible he understated the effort of this seal to Tsunade, because it requires an absolutely massive amount of chakra to effect so many separate seals, but he's the Kyuubi jinchuuriki, and Kurama raises his head at the first hint of a call.

'Told you that thing out in the woods was overkill,' the fox says archly, but chakra swirls around him and slides away, filling Naruto's limbs with lightness and his mind with a heady sense of power.

'Don't jinx us,' Naruto retorts, because the day is hardly over yet. But he focuses on the large seal before him, on the multitude of smaller seals scattered across Konoha, and feels the flicker-flare of Sasuke's familiar chakra as he activates his Sharingan. Ino is with him, along with another shinobi Naruto doesn't know, and they're closing in on a knot of Root members. Naruto halts his hand with the seal complete but not yet activated, even though it feels like ripping out his own fingernails to do so, and waits for Tsunade's signal.

A beat, another, and Naruto wants to claw his way out of his own skin, because waiting is absolute agony and what if Danzo escapes? What if one of the teams dies, facing him? Naruto won't lose another precious person, can't, not when Uzushio is finally rebuilt and her remaining people gathered. Not when he finally has the power to keep them safe, to do something when they're in trouble—

“Now,” Tsunade says, sharp and low, and Naruto slams as much chakra as he can grasp into the array, lights it up like a bonfire and reaches.

One more line, another curve, a sharp divide between two parts of a diagram, and Naruto can feel it under his skin when the Root seals shift, change, and activate. On the edges of his consciousness, he can feel it when all movement stills, when several dozen shinobi drop where they're standing. Naruto aches for them, for children taken from homes and families and from each other, forced to fight the same way graduates were in Kiri before the revolution. Each Root member has a story, a past—and now, hopefully, they'll have a future, too.

Now it's down to the ANBU teams and the plans that have been made.

But...not entirely.

Naruto closes his eyes, breathes out long and slow, and opens them again.

He's out the window and gone before Tsunade can even begin to see him move.

Don't let him unseal his arm.

Sasuke keeps those words as his mantra, hovering just outside the range of Danzo's Sharingan, and knows that the rest of his team are doing the same. Their plan is simple, the product of Shikaku, Inoichi, and Tsunade all spending the night brainstorming—come in hard and fast, in a group, and
leave Danzo no time to use any abilities beyond Izanagi. Avoid Uchiha Shisui’s Mangekyo, but trap Danzo in a genjutsu just subtle enough to remain undetected, so that he’ll overestimate his abilities. Killing blows only, at least until the stolen eyes are exhausted.

It seems impossible, facing someone of Danzo's reputation.

*Neji’s team is in position*, Ino signs from his left, eyes narrowed as she concentrates on the chakra signals around them. *Shikamaru’s team is close.*

Sasuke nods in acknowledgement, then signals for the other member of their team, Uzuki Yugao, to get to their positions. She fades away in an instant, moving soundlessly, and Sasuke takes a short breath.

He knows what Naruto is planning, even if Tsunade doesn’t. He knew even before Naruto told him, honestly. There’s no possible way Naruto would sit on the sidelines for something like this, not against Danzo, not with justice for his village on the line. And if they're already moving against Danzo, if they’re facing such odds, it can’t even be called interference. It’s simply…help.

Tsunade will hopefully see it like that, at least.

*Shikamaru in position*, Ino signs, dragging from his thoughts and making him tense, and even as she finishes there’s a vast surge of chakra from the Hokage’s tower. It’s blue and golden and touched with red, and Sasuke knows it well. He moves before the thought even completes, and Ino matches him, Yugao on their right as they blur forward.

Danzo is halfway to the village, coming from the training grounds, out in the open without any cover as Sasuke flashes forward, katana in hand and aimed to kill. The old man darts away, quick and prepared for sneak attacks, but from his other side comes Raidou to meet him and then Genma, low to the ground and moving fast, to catch Danzo in the leg with a neat row of poisoned senbon. Danzo staggers, stumbles, clearly not expecting quite so many opponents, and that’s opportunity enough. Ino finds her footing, flickers through the familiar hand seals, and her body drops. Danzo stills, and Sasuke takes the opening, lunging forward with his sword leading. They’ve practiced this move many times, have used it before on particularly stubborn targets, and Sasuke trusts Ino’s abilities nearly as much as he does his own.

And, indeed, half a second before he pierces flesh, Ino releases her jutsu, jumping back to her own body, and Danzo is too disoriented by the quick consecutive shifts—a bare handful of seconds in length, if even that—to evade. Sasuke hits him squarely, katana sinking deep, and casts his genjutsu even as Danzo’s body flickers away.

Danzo will think he slipped to the side, rather than using Izanagi. Hopefully, that will be enough of an edge to give them the win.

Neji whirls in, sparrow mask deceptively benign as he lashes out at tenketsu points, fast and fluid and impossibly graceful, Tenten half a step behind him with her tantō in hand. They move in perfect tandem, Tenten closing as Neji steps away, and Yugao comes from behind, her Hazy Moon Night hitting hard where Danzo can’t evade it.

Izanagi removes the wound, and Danzo launches an attack of his own, taijutsu strong and devastating and making all three fall back. But that’s another eye down.

The teams shift around him, as planned, and Sasuke mirrors Neji, leaping to the side as Ino, Shikamaru, and Choji launch one of their combination attacks. Another eye pays the price, but a razor-edged wind drives hard into Team 10’s midst and Ino cries out as blood blooms. Danzo
follows, kunai leading as he heads straight for her. Choji and Shikamaru lunge as well, shadows flaring and Choji blurring into another flattening attack, but the old man suffers the loss of his fourth eye to pass straight through it while Ino can't get away.

Sasuke snarls, about to leap in, but suddenly there's a whirl of familiar chakra, overwhelming and as hot as a sun, and a long, blue-sheened blade drives forward, making Danzo fall back. Bells chime, bright and wild, as Naruto drives past them all, his naginata darting out in a wide sweep that catches Danzo on the cheek. Danzo ducks away, deflecting a second blow with his kunai, but can't avoid the black blade of Raidou’s poisoned sword, or the shadowy tendrils that catch him by the throat.

*Five more,* Sasuke thinks, and trades his katana for a handful of shuriken and ninja wire. A step forward to get around Neji and Tenten as they close in and he has a clear shot, takes it without hesitation as Danzo hurls blades made of air in his direction. Genma catches his eye across the road and Sasuke dodges, even as a blur of blue and gold settles in front of him and meets the Fuuton attack with another. The two jutsus strike each other and explode, shaking the entire area and almost knocking several shinobi from their feet, but Genma, always one to take advantage of an opening, moves forward rather than back. His senbon are barely visible as they fly, but Sasuke flashes through hand seals, dodges around Naruto's back, and sends lightning sparking from his fingertips to charge the slender needles. They hit, four in a row in vital areas, and that’s six eyes used.

But Danzo isn't watching the rest of them, even as he tugs Sasuke's shuriken from his shoulder and lets it drop. Instead, his eyes are on Naruto, sharp and narrow and full of something Sasuke doesn’t even want to try to name.

“You,” he says, low and deadly. “That naginata—”

Naruto laughs, twisting the long haft through his fingers in a showy move meant to attract attention more than anything. From the way Danzo goes about six shades paler, it means something beyond that as well, though Sasuke couldn’t say what. “Me,” the blond agrees cheerfully. “And Sāji, of course. I'd hardly go into a fight without her.” The smile fades, and he plants his naginata in front of him, not quite leaning on it but certainly not as tense as the situation calls for. Sasuke recognizes the stance and wants to curse, because now is not the time for Naruto's make-all-villains-everywhere-repent-everything talent to come in to play. He tenses, ready to intervene, but Naruto's next words make him freeze.

“Uchiha Kagami,” he says softly, and Danzo's eyes narrow. “There were two of them, cousins, both brilliant and both unable to conform to what the Uchiha Clan wanted. You knew the elder one, right? The Nidaime’s right hand, who was never quite accepted because he stood by a man who they felt had always hated the Uchiha more than any other. They rejected him, even though he only ever looked to the good of the village. You must have hated them for that, because Kagami was one of your real friends. A comrade.”

Danzo lifts his chin. “Our ideals were the same,” he says darkly, and nothing else.

Naruto nods, as though this is a confession, and takes a step forward. “He was your friend,” he repeats. “You would both have done anything for the good of the village. But the Uchiha never saw that.”

“They saw a traitor,” Danzo spits. “One of Tobirama’s weak-willed followers. It was never enough for them, what he gave, not unless he was giving it for their clan alone. The Uchiha were too powerful to be trusted. They had the chance to serve in the name of Konoha, to help make it strong, but they squandered it.”

“And Kagami died for that, on a mission with two other Uchiha,” Naruto says, and he actually
sounds sympathetic. Not patronizing, as someone else most certainly would, but...sad. Kind.

Danzo stares at him, his face as hard as stone. “It was their doing,” he says, low and clearly still furious. “But no one saw, and no one acted. And the Uchiha who came after, who should have served their village over their clan, they also did nothing. I took what action was open to me.”

“Fugaku. Shisui. Itachi. And the second Kagami.” That grief is more tangible, more immediate, something personal, and Sasuke remembers the memorial stone, a murmured the best Uchiha as Naruto ran his fingers over a deeply carved name, and feels a flare of comprehension.

He doesn’t understand this idea of reincarnation, can't really grasp more than Naruto's poorly explained Uzushio did something and I remember being the Storm God, which is so outlandish as to be unbelievable but at the same time somehow just...fits. But it means loss, and old friends, and an understanding of past events that could never be gained from a history book.

“The diplomat’s son? Yes, with his bloodline and his family’s influence, he could have changed things. But instead he devoted himself to you, Arashi, and Konoha couldn’t risk his inevitable betrayal.” Danzo flicks through a familiar set of seals and slams a hand down on the ground, smoke whirling up around him to choke the road. Within it, something roars.

“You are the reason for his death, Uzukage!” Danzo calls, even as the smoke clears away. “He would have betrayed Konoha for you, and that couldn’t be allowed. I did it for the sake of the village.”

In front of him, Sasuke hears Naruto let out a long, slow breath, and then the chime of bells. The naginata rises, spinning through deft fingers, and then Naruto plants his feet in a ready stance. Chakra dances up the shaft, setting the seals carved there alight, and more rises, an aura of fierce, steady will that all but takes Sasuke's breath away.

“Maybe,” Naruto says, “but you did it for the sake of your Konoha. Not theirs.” A wave of his hand takes in the shinobi around him. “Your Konoha is a dark place, without bonds or precious people, and it lost the Will of Fire when you sacrificed your first innocent. It can never compare to the real thing, and since Saru isn’t here to prove that to you, Danzo, I’ll have to do it for him.”
Third Movement: Elegy for an End (Storm's Cadenza)

Chapter Notes

As you’ve probably noticed, Tuesday is...not an update day anymore. I’m going to aim for Thursday, but between my schedule and a sudden outbreak of what seems to be the plague in my department, that’s totally up in the air. About once a week is all I can promise at the moment. Many apologies, and I’m so grateful for your patience!

(Also! There is a bunch of truly incredible fanart for this piece, and for backslide as well. You should definitely check it out—the links are on my fanfiction.net profile [black.k.kat] under “story stuff”.)

[Elegy: An instrumental lament with praise for the dead.

Cadenza: Originally an improvised cadence by a soloist; later became an elaborate and written-out passage in an aria to display performance skills of an instrumentalist or performer.]

He and Danzo have fought before, Naruto knows. Nothing about this is new or astonishing, even given the eleven Sharingan eyes the old man now sports. They used to spar when Naruto was Arashi and visiting Konoha, because the Uzukage and the Hokage liked to test each other, and Danzo liked to test them both. The same way Danzo can still recognize Sāji and the flair Arashi has always given the otherwise unwieldy weapon, Naruto can watch Danzo move and have at least an inkling of what's coming next.

The summons is new, but not the tactic behind it.

“Uzumaki,” Sasuke starts behind him, a general enough name not to give him away, and Naruto is thankful for it. Kurama is one ace he’s going to keep up his sleeve until the very last moment, if he even plays it at all.

“You and your teams should take care of the summons,” Naruto interrupts before Sasuke can say any more. “I’ll take Danzo.”

This is my fight, he doesn’t say, though he thinks Sasuke might understand regardless. This is the end of decades of suffering. This is justice for an entire village.

Sasuke doesn’t even hesitate. He murmurs, “Four eyes left,” then darts away, fingers flying in ANBU code, and the others pull back to face the tapir-like creature with him. Naruto doesn’t watch them go, doesn’t turn his head to check on them even though he feels like he should, but keeps his eyes fixed on Danzo. Four Sharingan left, four killing blows that Izanagi won’t allow, but that’s simple enough. Four eyes to go and then Danzo will be a normal man, albeit a powerful one in his own right. But he’s old, the same way Sarutobi was old, and Naruto is not.

That gives him the advantage here.

Taking a breath, Naruto runs his thumb over one of the seals on Sāji’s haft, and the glow intensifies. Light creeps up the wood, pooling in carved seals and casting pale blue shadows over Naruto's body. Simple, subtle things, barely there, but powerful. People always focus on the big changes, where
fuinjutsu is concerned. They look at the transportation seals, the bijuu-bindings, the appearance of life given to inanimate objects, but as impressive as those are, the real power lies in seals that catch and trap and hold. Changes in perception, chakra boots, a little more speed than the human body should be capable of, an array to trap chakra and negate attacks before they reach the target.

Arashi was good with seals. Brilliant. A prodigy, even.

Naruto is better.

It’s a simple matter of capability, in the end. Arashi had an Uzumaki’s chakra reserves—large, yes, even for being part of a clan famed for their strength—but in the end they were still only a man’s reserves, and eventually Arashi hit bottom. He couldn’t use the transportation seals he started to design, couldn’t fight full-out with Sāji completely activated or he’d tire too quickly.

But Naruto has Kurama on top of being an Uzumaki. Transportation seals are nothing. Sending a pulse of chakra across the entire continent to call his people home is nothing. Raising shields and strengthening barriers and powering secrecy seals and sparring with Gaara all at the same time—even that can’t begin to drain him. With eighteen years of practice in managing his own power, plus Arashi’s lifetime spent learning to control chakra in general standing behind him, he’s very, very close to inexhaustible.

Danzo is an old man, and every use of Izanagi drains him. All Naruto has to do is strike four killing blows and outlast him.

The tapir roars, and Naruto can feel the pull of wind sucking him in for half a second before Sāji flares brighter and the pull vanishes. He grins and launches himself forward, meets Danzo head-on because that’s the only way he ever likes to fight, and a kunai knocks the naginata aside as Danzo slides past. Naruto knows these steps, though, and turns with him, lashing out hard in a kick at his kneecap. Danzo evades it, darts away too quick for a man of his age, and wind rushes back with razor edges.

Naruto just laughs, spins through the gale with Sāji leading, and she swallows the chakra down greedily, drinks it away until there’s only a faint breeze left and glows all the brighter for it. A slash from the blade pushes Danzo back and he snarls, lashes out with another burst of wind aimed to take out Naruto’s legs. Naruto sees it coming, though, plants Sāji’s butt in the packed earth and vaults right over the elder’s head with a nimble twist, the naginata’s blade flashing down before Danzo can turn and block, ever so slightly faster than it should logically be.

Three eyes left, now.

Danzo’s kunai slashes over his head, reinforced with wind chakra to augment its power and range, and Naruto ducks just in time. Sāji blocks the second strike, redirects the third, and Naruto leaps away, putting distance between them as he brings his hands up, boar dog ram shaped around Sāji’s shaft with the ease of extensive practice. “Suiton: Tearing Torrent!”

Senju Tobirama is considered the greatest Suiton user of all time because he could pull water out of the air and use his techniques even in a desert. Naruto’s greatest affinity will always be with wind, but given his chakra levels and his decades of practice, his water jutsus are only slightly poorer, and he has the power to make them only slightly less destructive than Tobirama’s when he puts his mind to it. The water leaves his palm in a wild spiral, fast and vicious, and even as it surges forward Naruto brings his hands together in a ringing clap for Fuuton: Gale Palm, and wind screams after it, just barely contained. It strikes the torrent and hurries it forward, too fast to escape. Danzo tries to leap away, but is swallowed by the waters, and half a second later the sharp-hot smell of ozone and the shrieking of a thousand birds makes Naruto leap straight up into the air.
Sasuke doesn’t hesitate, but pushes forward even as Naruto flips over his shoulder. His Chidori is bright and powerful, making Naruto's hair stand on end as it passes below him, and a mere glancing blow to the retreating wave lights the whole thing up like an electric storm pulled down to earth. The smell of scorched meat rises, but half an instant later Danzo is in front of them again, wind-augmented kunai slashing down hard and fast.

Two eyes left.

Sāji catches the kunai, eats the chakra and turns the blade away, and Naruto follows through with the movement, half-spinning and bringing the butt of his weapon up even as the blade knocks Danzo's arm out to the side. It strikes flesh, and beneath the metal-capped end a seal blooms, sharp and dark and the perfect mirror of the largest one on Sāji’s haft. As soon as it has set itself into Danzo's skin, Naruto breaks away, falls back, and throws out three wind jutsus—Danzo's wind blades, the ones Sāji so gleefully swallowed—in quick succession, not even pausing to aim.

The seal glows black, and they all strike true.

Danzo snarls even as Izanagi turns the wounds to a dream and vanishes them. He lunges again, and this time Naruto is just slightly too slow evading the wind-edged kunai. It scores a long cut down his arm from bicep to elbow, and he hisses as he draws away. Sāji slips slightly in his hand, not much but enough to leave an opening, and Danzo takes advantage, pushing forward.

Sasuke slides around Naruto's left side like they've been doing this for years, like they know each other’s every move before it’s made, and his katana bats the kunai to the side even as he breathes out a gout of flames.

The fire never reaches its target, though. Danzo ducks to the side and comes up with another whirl of wind-blades, but the delay, slight at it is, gives Naruto more than enough time to recover. He’s been sparring with Gaara for years now, or with Haku or Roushi, and they're all merciless fighters, never giving their opponent half a second to breathe. Naruto has adjusted, has learned to hit and hit and keep hitting until there's no space for even the weakest counterattack. He lunges, Sāji swallowing down the unfamiliar chakra and the remnants of Sasuke's fire, and then whips around, one hand just glancing over Danzo's skin as he slides past. The bells in his hair chime wildly as he drops and rolls, Danzo’s kunai whistling millimeters above his head. Even as he twists to his feet, Naruto brings his hands together, flickering through hand seals, and breathes, “Activate.”

Something stabs deep into his right shoulder, but in the same moment Danzo cries out and staggers back, steps lurching wildly, as if he’s drunk. Naruto grits his teeth and climbs to his feet, ignoring the throbbing burn of a wound that’s already knitting itself up. He tightens his grip on his naginata, whirls it up, and throws himself forward in a headlong rush that Danzo doesn’t even see coming, much less have time to dodge.

Izanagi activates for the last time, removing the gut-wound as well as the seal that threw Danzo’s equilibrium off, and Danzo snarls in anger but holds his ground. The very last of his chakra rises, almost too weak to keep Hashirama’s cells in his right arm dormant, but he calls it up regardless. He straightens, lifts his chin, and meets Naruto's sharp gaze across the open space between them. Their surroundings are quiet, the summons clearly having been dealt with, and Naruto keeps his feet planted as he swings Sāji around and plants the butt against the hard-packed road.

This is it, he thinks, and is grateful that the mask hides his sharp-edged grin.

Chakra flickers, triggers something, and Naruto feels it wash over him in a wave. He takes a breath, another, and lets his eyes slip closed.
“You don’t wish to fight me, Arashi,” Danzo says, mellow and friendly. “We’ve always been close, haven’t we?”

Kurama snarls in his head, low and harsh, and his fierce red chakra rises, throws the other power off like a tattered veil and casts it aside.

Naruto opens his eyes again, and this time he doesn’t bother to hide the triumph in them. *Over. This is it. We’ve won.*

“Oh,” he says softly, “I think you’re wrong there, Danzo. You’re the reason Uzushio fell. I don’t hate many people, but I think you’ve made that list. And trying to use Kotoamatsukami on me, to convince me that the man responsible for *hundreds* of deaths is my *friend*? That just makes it worse.”

Danzo is already pale, weak from hovering too close to chakra exhaustion, but at that he goes even paler, blanches to an almost ghostly white and staggers back two full steps before he steels himself once more. With a curse, he throws himself forward, clearly thinking to use the Izanagi he believes he still possesses to evade a death-blow and then keep running, but Naruto pushes off the ground with a hard kick, whirls over his head, and brings Sāji’s thick oaken haft arcing down like a club. It strikes with a dull crack, throwing the old man forward, and he hits the ground in a heavy and boneless tumble, out cold.

Naruto ducks his head, flips in midair, and drops to the dirt in a crouch, Sāji gripped in front of him in both hands as a counterbalance. The bells in his hair jangle, then settle with a tinkling hush, and he breathes out long and slow.

*I'm done,* he thinks, pushing to his feet, and it feels like there are a hundred eyes on him, three hundred, four. Like every soul lost that day, killed because of treachery and paranoia and one man’s warmongering in the name of a fearful peace, is looking at him, seeing this victory—their victory, finally, so very many years after the tragedy took place.

It’s for them. For Mio and Shunka and Yui, for Haru and Fuyu and Saehara-sensei, for Kagami and his lonely end. For the son raised as an orphan, for every child forced to grow up without a home. For every family scattered and uprooted and cast to the wind, without anywhere to call their own. For deaths and stolen lives and a city ruined but now made whole.

For Uzushio, Naruto thinks, and she whispers to him, joy and sorrow and satisfaction, revenge found in justice and a village restored, soon to rise above its former position and become something even greater.

It’s done, and now Uzushio can look only to the future. Now Uzushio can come into its own.

One promise fulfilled, and Naruto thinks that Kagami would be proud.

His oath to Mito comes next, and it’s one that Naruto is truly overjoyed to bear out.

Uzushio is long overdue to take its place as one of their world’s powers, and Naruto isn’t about to wait any longer.

It’s not as though he’s been entirely subtle or even remotely evasive, so Naruto is honestly a little surprised that it takes Tsunade as long as it does to track him down.

Danzo is in Konoha’s custody, Genma, Raidou, and Neji having taken him T&I the moment the dust from the fight began to settle. Ino is seated on the roots of a tree, pale but conscious, with both
Shikamaru and Choji pretending not to hover over her and failing miserably as the unfamiliar purple-haired kunoichi patches her up. There's a long, deep gash across her stomach, raggedly edged in a way that speaks of an encounter with the tail end of a wind jutsu, but she's healing. It probably won't even scar.

“Interesting seal you used there,” Tenten says almost idly, seated on the ground with her legs crossed under her. “The second one, I mean.”

From where he’s leaning against the tree Naruto is seated under, Sasuke makes a noise of agreement, though his gaze never quite wavers from his blonde partner.

It takes Naruto a moment to remember what she’s talking about. His head feels strange, empty and fuzzy and sort of echoingly hollow, and there's an odd ache in his chest that he can't understand. It’s not relief, definitely, or victory, or even anger. Not triumph or loss, but…something. He’s just not quite sure what. “You mean—oh. That. It’s similar to the Five Elements Seal, but where that disrupts the chakra when laid over an even-numbered seal, this one sends little pulses of chakra into the system at random intervals. The body can't process the fluctuation, and it ends up throwing the rest of the systems off as well when it tries to compensate.”

Tenten’s expression is the intense flavor of interested Naruto's come to expect from Fū in regards to learning sealing, and he wonders a little wickedly how the two girls will get along, and who will end up suffering the most if they do. Haku, probably. Or maybe Suigetsu. Fū seems to take great pleasure in torturing both of them.

It strikes him then, with a pang, that he wants to see Fū and Haku and Gaara and Utakata and everyone else. He wants it with a physical ache, a tense-tight longing only slightly tempered by the warm weight of Uzushio in the back of his mind. The last few days have pushed them out of his mind; even though he remembered Uzushio as a whole, he all but forgot about the people who make it precious. Had to, to keep from losing his admittedly fairly short temper in the face of proof regarding Danzo's actions. But now, with Danzo gone and justice all but had, he can think of them safely. He can feel homesick even when in the presence of friends. Even in the presence of Sasuke, and it feels cruel, somehow offensive to his…lover? Boyfriend? What word is applicable here?

But Uzushio is his home. His family is there, blood relatives and chosen family alike. Naruto knows, bone-deep and certain, that it’s not wrong to miss them the way he is. Even if he’s never really experienced a situation like this before, has never been removed enough to actually have to miss them, it feels…like a good ache. Like stretching new muscles. Just—good.

Tomorrow, he tells himself, even as a familiar chakra bears down on them like an avalanche. They’ll be here tomorrow. And then we can see what Tenten and Fū are like together, how Gaara and Sasuke get along now, with years and space between them.

“Arashi!” Tsunade bellows, far too small a woman to logically be as intimidating as she actually is. Her eyes are narrowed, and every inch or her radiates fury. “You.”

Naruto winces slightly. There's the first layer of the disguise gone, and while he has no real need to hide now that Danzo has been captured, he still gets the feeling that Haku will kill him slowly as soon as he finds out just how many people know one or both of his secrets. “Hokage-sama,” he answers politely, trying for a smile that falters slightly when Tsunade plants her feet in front of him and folds her arms with a glare worthy of Kurama at his angriest.

“Give me,” Tsunade growls, “one good reason why I shouldn’t throw you in a holding cell right next to Danzo, Uzukage.”
Naruto winces. “Um. Because if I’m not there to activate the transportation seal tomorrow at ten o’clock my really, excessively overprotective shinobi will go on the warpath, and I have full confidence in their ability to destroy entire countries if they put their minds to it? Not that I would ever advocate the destruction of Konoha in any shape or form, but I should probably be on hand so they don’t even consider it.”

“And because he’d probably be able to walk right back out of the cell again, no matter which one you put him in,” Sasuke suggests, sounding wryly amused. He doesn’t flinch under the force of Tsunade’s stare, but meets her gaze with a faintly raised brow and an eloquent shrug. “Truth.”

Tsunade huffs out a breath and pinches the bridge of her nose, as if warding off a headache. “That is…a good reason,” she concedes after a moment, though when she opens her eyes the glare hasn’t diminished at all. “And not announcing yourself? Were I any less lenient, Arashi, I could take that as willful deception of an ally and declare a war with Uzushio. I hope you’re aware of that.”

Naruto was aware of that, when he, Gaara, Utakata, and Roushi made the plan. They were all aware of it, of the risk and how it weighed out against the reward. But they’d gone ahead with it regardless, because Danzo had to be stopped. Uzushio has grown too big to hide now. It was easy, back when it was a ruin, or even when it was newly rebuilt and sparsely repopulated. As it is currently, there are too many people. Trading has to be strictly regulated, but it’s hard to bring in enough food only working through a handful of vetted merchants and farmers. And more people arrive every day, having heard the city’s call and traveled across entire countries, wanting to settle in Whirlpool. They’re going to have to open their borders soon, and Naruto wasn’t willing to risk doing so when Danzo was still free.

He meets Tsunade's eyes and doesn’t waver. “The same way Uzushio could declare war on Konoha for harboring the war criminal who broke a decades-old peace treaty and supplied information about Uzushio's defenses to an enemy,” he retorts, unfolding from his seated position and rising smoothly to his feet. “We both have far too much to lose here, Tsunade. I made my decision because I remember that as a little girl, you loved Uzushio too. You came to see my Jounin Exams, hanging off your granduncle’s arm, and you were happy in my village. You thought it was beautiful, and that the people were kind. You are Mito’s granddaughter, and knowing that, I decided that it was worth the risk. Don’t make me regret that.”

There’s a long, long moment of tense silence, and then all at once Tsunade's posture relaxes. She steps back and lets her arms drop, even as her eyes soften. “You really are him,” she murmurs. “Jiraiya said you couldn’t be, but I couldn’t imagine you being anyone else. I’ve only ever met one person with a conviction like yours Arashi, and he’s…not here.”

She means him, Naruto knows. He can see it in her expression, read it in her eyes, but she clearly believes that Naruto is elsewhere, hasn’t made the connection so blatantly in her thoughts. It’s to be expected, honestly—she’s seeing the immediate, because she actually met Arashi when he was at the age Naruto is now, and she’s likely still thinking of Naruto as the twelve-year-old who disappeared. She’s an adult, used to seeing most people as simply younger than her, so it’s a fairly easy mistake to make.

“Of course,” is all he says, however. “I let Uzushio fall. I failed it the first time around. This is… fixing my mistake.”

Tsunade doesn’t try to tell him that it wasn’t his fault, the way Haku and Gaara and Karin do whenever he brings it up. She just looks at him for a moment, eyes soft and sad, and then inclines her head in a shallow bow. “Uzukage-sama, if you would join me in my office, we have much to discuss,” she says as she rises, and there’s a regretful smile pulling at her lips, because she
understands his feelings the way no one but a Kage could.

Naruto smiles back, takes a breath, and steps forward. *Always, always forward. Don’t look back. We don’t have to anymore.* “Of course, Hokage-sama,” he returns. “Lead the way.”

With a sharp nod, Tsunade turns on her heel and strides away, and Naruto casts one last, quick smile and a murmured, “Later, teme,” at Sasuke before he follows her back into the village proper.
Multiple people have asked how I feel about chapter 700, and I recently encountered a piece someone wrote on Tumblr which perfectly sums up my reaction. If you're interested, there's a link on my fanfiction.net profile. Go read it, it’s brilliant. Even if you're a fan, I think it raises some good points.

[Refrain: A repeating phrase that is played at the end of each verse in the song.]

When Sasuke finally lets himself back into his apartment after a lengthy debriefing, feeling dusty and sweaty and tired, there's a familiar figure waiting for him. Sai is perched on his living room windowsill, one foot dangling out over the street, the other pulled up. He’s wearing a smug smile, as though Danzo's defeat was entirely his doing, but for once Sasuke can't bring himself to feel offended.

After what the other man has been through at the elder's hands, he deserves it.

“Get out of my apartment,” is all he says, though, because he and Sai have certain patterns of behavior they will never deviate from. Namely antagonism, no matter how willing they might be to risk their lives for each other. Sakura never quite gets it, but Sasuke wouldn’t have it any other way.

Sai just smiles at him—fake, yes, but mostly because he knows how much it pisses Sasuke off. “Friends shouldn’t talk to each other like that, Big Dick,” he says, cheerfully enough.

Sasuke growls, loosening his sword in its sheath. “I told you never to call me that again if you valued your tongue,” he threatens, stalking towards his teammate with murder in his heart. Four years of penis jokes. Surely that merits a little homicide.

“Ugly and Beautiful like it when I call you that, though,” Sai protests, entirely unfazed by the katana that comes to rest millimeters from his carotid. “And my books say that nicknames show affection between close friends.” When Sasuke snarls, he raises his hands. “Sorry, sorry.”

“Sakura and Ino both stole their senses of humor from preteen boys,” Sasuke mutters, but, appeased, he turns and starts removing his equipment. “You checked on the others?”

Sai shifts, dropping both legs over the inside of the sill and sliding down to the floor to lean against the wall. “Yes,” he answers after a moment. “They're still sleeping. Tsunade-sama had the Uzukage remove my seal, and I led several ANBU teams into the main Root base. Arashi-sama said his sleep seal will last indefinitely, so we have plenty of time to prepare.”

It is…odd to hear referring to Naruto as sama. Intellectually Sasuke knows he’s the Uzukage, knows that he holds the same position as Tsunade, but it’s still strange. Naruto is Naruto, except that now he’s Youko and Arashi and the Uzukage as well. Sasuke pauses in unstrapping his katana, staring down at the sheathed blade contemplatively as he thinks about that again.

There were three points, after Naruto left, that Sasuke considers his lowest. Moments where he very nearly threw everything away, where he almost gave it all up—Kakashi and Sakura, Jiraiya and
Konoha and his search—and walked away.

The first came a week and a half after Naruto's disappearance, and one day after the first search party’s return. They’d come back empty-handed, without so much as a rumor to point them in the right direction, and Sasuke had…snapped. He’d snarled at Sakura, sworn at Kakashi, and had stalked away from the meeting with Tsunade, full of undirected, seething fury. Lashing out had been pointless, hadn’t left him feeling any better, but he’d done it anyway because Naruto was gone, Naruto had left and if he wasn’t in Konoha what did that leave Sasuke to hold on to?

Because Naruto was the only thing Sasuke had been able to grow attached to, that he’d allowed himself to grow attached to. Naruto was a genius—not like Itachi, blinding brilliant and so far ahead Sasuke couldn’t even see his shadow, but a genius like Sasuke, who worked hard and pulled ahead and fit within the lines of reality even if he was still very, very good. He was a genius, was like Sasuke in more way than one, and if he’d abandoned everything and everyone so easily Sasuke—boiling with rage and frustration and hurt—didn’t know why he couldn’t do the very same.

He’d gotten as far as the village walls that time, before a blonde with an armful of flowers had stopped him and just…talked.

To this day, Sasuke doesn’t know if Ino realizes just what she averted with that conversation.

The second time was a mere month later. Searches were still fruitless, but Sasuke signed up for them anyway. He scoured towns and roads and questioned travelers, mapped out every inch of forest for as far as his feet could take him, and still there was nothing. No word, no sign, not a hair anywhere, and Sasuke hated Naruto for it, for abandoning him and running away and just…leaving.

Leaving like everyone else who’d ever mattered to Sasuke.

That time, he’d made it out of the village and almost halfway to Oto, the seal on his neck burning and sheer, overwhelming rage eating at his veins from the inside out.

He’d stopped himself, eventually. Had staggered to a halt beneath a tree and leaned back against it, just…remembering. Thinking. Because he knew Naruto, knew that he’d never abandon anyone without a reason and an extremely good cause, and Sasuke…didn’t have those. He was just running away. Running to power, certainly, but…not his own power. Not his own abilities, gained like Naruto's through time and dedication and work, even when everyone called him a failure and a monster and a hopeless case.

Orochimaru offered him power, but it was the kind of offer Naruto never would have looked twice at.

Sasuke had stayed there, as night faded into dawn, and simply thought. Thought about missions and training and late nights walking through Konoha side-by-side, and then he’d stood up, ignored the throbbing of the seal on his neck, and headed back to his village.

The third time was the worst.

After the third time, he gave up his search for Itachi, his quest for revenge, and turned his back on his slain family, looking for his departed teammate instead.

Sasuke doesn’t fool himself thinking that they’d approve of his choice.

He’d been with Jiraiya, then, traveling between villages and sleeping on rocky ground beneath the stars whenever they couldn’t reach a village before nightfall. Sasuke had lain on his back, fuming at the lack of anything and staring up at the stars, when suddenly it had hit him.
All that time, he’d been searching for news of his brother and news of Naruto simultaneously. He’d been dividing his efforts, cutting his efficiency in half, and that wasn’t something a good shinobi did. At some point, there had to be a sacrifice.

At some point, he had to make a choice.

And he had. He’d chosen Naruto, chosen the future, and let everything else slide back into the past. It had taken weeks, many of them, to reach his decision, but he’d done it.

Knowing what he does now—of Naruto, of his clan, of Itachi—Sasuke can't help but feel overwhelmingly relieved.

“Good,” he says distractedly, because Sai is watching him, sharp and birdlike, black eyes seeing far too much. “Good. Was…was Arashi almost finished there?”

There’s a moment of extended silence, and then Sai’s face abruptly lights up with an unholy glee he could have only learned from Ino. “Oh,” he says, in a tone of sudden enlightenment, rising to his feet with an entirely unnecessary bounce. “I understand Beautiful’s insinuations now! You and the Uzukage are copulating—”

Wham.

Sasuke stalks across the room and slams his window shut, not even sparing a glance for his teammate, who could (hopefully) be lying dead on the street below. Unfortunately, Sasuke's luck is never that good. Also, Sai is like a cockroach. He just won't die. Sasuke has tried before. Many times. Repeatedly.

A sharp knock on the glass makes him spin back around, halfway to the kitchen, and he folds his arms across his chest and glares. Sai just beams at him, politely waving the heavy volume on tactics that Sasuke had thrown at him, and calls, “Thank you, Big Dick, I've been meaning to ask to borrow this. You're very kind.”

Sasuke growls and starts back across the room, but before he can take more than a step Sai is gone, darting up to the roof and then away.

Someday—someday—Sasuke will murder him, and it will be sweet.

It’s full dark when Naruto finally manages to drag himself away from meetings and councils and reports, leaving Tsunade to straighten the last few details out. Danzo is in a holding cell, carefully monitored, and the Root ANBU are being moved to a special ward of the hospital, where experts will attempt to break their conditioning and integrate them back into the village. Naruto offered to take some of them back to Uzushio, to relieve a bit of the burden, and Tsunade has assured him that she’ll consider it, though Naruto recognizes the conviction in her eyes.

This is a Konoha problem, and Tsunade will treat it—will fix it—as such. Even though they're allies—signed and sealed now, given the presence of both Kages and a need to ensure cooperation on both sides—Tsunade isn’t going to share this burden.

Naruto wouldn’t either, were their positions reversed.

Now, with night slowly creeping towards dawn, Naruto just feels…worn. There's tension and anticipation and relief and triumph all twisting beneath his skin, but it’s buried under a layer of exhaustion that makes his head spin. Too many emotions, too many ups and downs in the last
twenty-four hours have left him all but reeling, and right now the extent of Naruto's desires can be encompassed by a soft bed, a warm blanket, and at least five uninterrupted hours.

Sasuke's apartment is dark, when he arrives, but that isn’t a surprise. It’s almost three in the morning, and he likely went to bed long ago. There’s a cold container of ramen sitting on the table by the door, but Naruto is too tired even for that, and decides to save it for the morning, when he’s conscious enough to enjoy it. With one wistful sigh at the thought of hot, brothy deliciousness, he kicks his sandals off and heads for the couch, fully intending to fling himself down on it and simply pass out.

But there’s something in the way.

Naruto blinks down at Sasuke, who’s propped against the arm and watching him, eyes heavy-lidded with sleep. Sasuke just huffs and rises to his feet, stretching out his arms.

“Come on, dobe,” he says, as though it’s nothing at all. “If you try sleeping here again, you’ll wake up in knots. This couch isn’t exactly meant for sleeping. My bed’s big enough for two.”

He could get embarrassed. He could protest and stake out the couch regardless of what his spine will look like upon waking. But Naruto is tired, too far gone into exhaustion to even think of putting up a fight, or to do any of the other things sharing a bed with his new boyfriend would imply, regardless of how tempting Sasuke looks in loose pants and a tight tank top. He waves a hand in acknowledgement, and Sasuke grabs it and uses it to pull him down the hall.

The bed really is big enough for two, but Naruto doesn’t protest when they end up sharing the same space in the center. He closes his eyes and sleeps, and if he dreams, he doesn’t remember.

(“Have you ever thought,” Kagami asks, staring out the Uzukage's office window, “where you’d be —what you’d be, if you weren’t a shinobi?”

Naruto looks over at him, pen forgotten in his hand. Maybe that’s the difference between them, he thinks. Because Naruto has never for a minute seriously considered not being a shinobi, not being exactly who and what he is now.

But Kagami has. Kagami is a dreamer and always has been, given to wild flights of fancy and fantasies no one else can ever rival. Naruto wonders, sometimes, just how much attention Kagami pays to this world, to what's here in front of him rather than rising in his thoughts like a castle in the sky.

Uchiha Kagami is a good person, loyal and steadfast and fiercely devoted, with a quicksilver smile and infectious laugh. He follows his heart rather than his head, never hides what he thinks or how he feels, and Naruto loves him all the more for it. Kagami loves Senju Azami because of it, loves the son he shouldn’t have by the traditional rival of his clan, and if times were different, if Kagami were different, it could be the beginning of a new age.

But Kagami is and always will be a dreamer, too focused on what could be to pay much attention to what is. Naruto hardly wants to let his friend go, but...he could. To change the world, he could even do it happily. And if he cared for politics, or the power that lies behind his family line, or for more than getting away from his clan and proving them wrong, Kagami could change things.

Sometimes Naruto wonders if Kagami can see that as well as he can, but he never asks.

“No,” he says at length, offering up a shrug. Because he is a shinobi, he always has been, and he’s happy with how his life has played out. Why would he need to think of such a thing, given that?
Kagami doesn’t huff or roll his eyes—he’s too far into his thoughts to even feel his usual irritation at his best friend’s firm grounding in reality, though it normally gets at least a slight reaction. “Think about it,” he prompts, his gaze sliding over the red rooftops, all but glowing in the setting sun. “And don’t just say a fisherman, Arashi. That joke got old years ago.”

Naruto rolls his eyes then, because as he remembers it, Kagami was the one who started that joke. Nevertheless, he sets his pen down and leans back in his chair, the bells on the ends of his hair-ribbon tinkling softly. They’re not the same ones Hiruzen stole, because he’s a bastard and still hasn’t returned those even years later, but a gift from Shunka. He fingers them absently as he considers the question, frowning as one option after another is assessed and then discarded.

“…What about you?” he asks, after several minutes without coming any closer to a solution.

Kagami smiles, soft and a little wistful, and answers without hesitation. Clearly he’s thought of this before. “A florist. Azami loves flowers. We could have a little shop together. It would be…nice. Peaceful. I think it would be wonderful, and…maybe our son would have a knack for plants, too.”

*You’d go mad within a month*, Naruto thinks but doesn’t say, because he’s been Uzukage long enough to be at least mildly tactful, even around those especially precious to him. He turns the question over for another minute or two, and then shrugs. “…A ramen chef?” he ventures. “Old lady Ine says I have a knack for it.”

This time, Kagami does snort, and he pulls his gaze away from Uzushio outside to grin at his best friend. “If we put you behind a ramen bar, Arashi, we’d have to roll you out,” he says merrily, eyes full of mischief. “I know all Uzumaki are obsessed with the stuff, but even taking the rest of them into account, you’re a ramen-loving freak of nature.”

“Hey!” Naruto levels a threatening finger at the other man. “I don’t say anything about your obsession with fans. If anyone’s a freak of nature here, it’s you, Uchiha.”

“At least I don’t eat my clan symbol, thanks.”

“Naruto is a perfect ramen topping, and you’re a heathen if you can’t appreciate it.”

“Just watch, someday you’re going to be reincarnated as a fishcake, and I am going to laugh so hard, Arashi. I am going to die laughing.”

“And I won’t miss you at all, bastard.”

Kagami laughs, and the sound of it makes Naruto grin, too. Warm dark eyes settle on him, so familiar, and Kagami taps a finger against his nose and winks. “Sure you won’t,” he says with exaggerated belief, and Naruto, caught in his lie, just chuckles.

Sasuke watches Tsunade greet the Kazekage, clasping the younger blonde’s arms and smiling at her. Temari smiles back, slightly more reserved but just as warm, and Sasuke reminds himself to relax. Suna is an ally, and he isn’t here as a guard.

The reason for his presence is crouched atop the wall Sasuke is leaning against, sitting on his heels with his arms crossed loosely on his knees. Naruto is all but vibrating with excitement, sitting on his heels with his arms crossed loosely on his knees. Naruto is all but vibrating with excitement, and Sasuke has no idea if this is going to end well or in absolute disaster. Anything that Naruto anticipates with this much glee is to be approached warily, if at all.

“Did you know?” he asks, just for something to say, nodding towards Temari in her ceremonial hat
Naruto laughs softly, his eyes warm as he watches the two women, and he nods. “Gaara was astonished,” he says with amusement. “Or, well, astonished for Gaara. For a second there, I honestly thought he might faint. Especially since Temari said in her speech that one of her reasons for accepting the position was to build a place where people like Gaara could live in peace.”

“But you’ve already done that,” Sasuke thinks, though he stays silent. He catches Naruto glancing up at the morning sun again and rolls his eyes, elbowing the blond in the ribs. “Oi, dobe. They’ll get there. Just let the Hokage get the greetings out of the way.”

“You seem to think I was joking about my shinobi throwing a fit if I'm not exactly on time,” Naruto retorts, though he does stop shifting quite so noticeably. “Haku and Gaara together are bad enough, but Fū and Kabuto get a kick out of it and are constantly egging them on. It’s awful.”

“Your life is very hard,” Sasuke drawls, but his eyes are drawn back to the only other Kage to arrive so far. Terumi Mei had entered the village several hours ago with a handful of jounin and nine genin teams, and though Naruto has been watching her a little more closely than he has anyone else, he hasn’t otherwise reacted to her presence. Sasuke knows the story, has been told what exactly it was the happened in Uzushio and why Haku was suddenly called away, and wonders how in the world Naruto is able to stay so calm.

Naruto hums in agreement, following Sasuke's gaze. “It’s fine,” he says softly, as though he can read the thoughts Sasuke is certain his face doesn’t show. “If something had gone wrong in Uzushio they would have informed me. Until I'm told otherwise, I'm going to assume the best and believe they managed to settle it diplomatically.”

Sasuke has seen what heights belief in Naruto can push people to, how fiercely they're willing to defend him and what he stands for, and allows himself to set the worry aside. Naruto is right. No village—especially one answering to Naruto—would leave their Kage in the dark if things went badly.

Temari and Tsunade step apart, and the Hokage waves Shizune forward to escort the teams away. The Kazekage stays, along with her escort, and just as a clock somewhere in the village chimes ten, Tsunade looks over at Naruto and inclines her head.

Naruto lets out a soft huff of air, then slides off the wall and strides into the center of the square. He comes to a halt and raises a hand, and a piece of paper flutters from it to fall to the stones before him. Like a wave breaking on the shore, power strikes with it and surges.

The transportation seal unfurls around his feet like a flower opening, thick-stark black lines spreading out through a combination of chakra and willpower. They whirl out around him, five feet in every direction, and then settle and start to glow. Naruto bites his thumb, flicks drops of blood across the wide array, and then steps back as the light brightens to become blinding. Sasuke resists the urge to look away and shield his eyes, squinting through the brilliance until he can make out a shape, and then another, and another, and another. A whole group is making their way through from the other side of the seal, he sees as the light starts to die away. Shinobi in dove-grey and sea-blue, standing tall and proud, twelve genin all under the age of fourteen with them.

Haku is in the lead, hair loose and visor gone to leave his face bare, and he looks nowhere but at Naruto, gaze unwavering despite the stares of those in Konoha. He stares, eyes intent and expression politely blank, and Naruto laughs, reaching up. He takes the contacts from his eyes, tossing them carelessly aside, and then hooks a finger in the top of his mask and drags it down to hang around his neck.
“Hey, Haku,” he says cheerfully, and it isn’t Youko’s polite reserve or even Arashi’s practiced dignity. This is Naruto, effusive and sun-bright and warm, beaming at one of his first friends and smugly pleased with the state of the world.

Relief spreads across Haku's face like an icecap melting, and he smiles back, soft and overwhelmingly thankful. “Naruto,” he answers into the ringing silence around them. Then he bows, quick but respectful, and adds, “Uzukage-sama, Uzushio is well in your absence. Our teams are ready to compete.”

Naruto grins, and he doesn’t look away from his people, but Sasuke can see Mei standing with a man wearing an eye-patch, who’s gesturing effusively and speaking in a hushed whisper. Her brows are arched, but she isn’t moving. On her right, Temari is stiff and still, face ashen under her tan as she stares at her little brother and the three children all but clinging to his robes.

Tsunade looks like she doesn’t know whether to march over and punch Naruto, or hug him. Sasuke winces. That’s…probably to be expected.

But laughter drags his attention back to the Uzushio shinobi, and he can't help the faint smile that pulls at his lips at the sight. Naruto stands with his people, laughing and smiling and so very, very bright, one hand on Gaara’s shoulder as the redhead says something. It’s…good. Right.

Sasuke looks at him, and Naruto glances up and catches his eye, and their gazes hold. Sasuke lets his smile spread, pushing away from the wall and heading for the group.

*My future,* he thinks, and so many times since Naruto left he’s thought it. Now it isn’t just a hope, but a reality. Three times he wavered, in the past, but he doesn’t feel uncertain, *can’t,* not when it feels like the sun is in his chest and the world has ceased to matter.

He’s not going to waver again.
Fourth Movement: Reunions, Rinforzando

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay, but RL is insane and the mere thought of trying to post this yesterday just about made my brain explode. It’s extra-long and gooey to make up for that, though.

[Rinforzando: reinforced, emphasized; sometimes like a sudden crescendo, but often applied to a single note.]

“Sensei, it’s so green.”

Gaara drags his eyes away from the—entirely unharmed, thankfully—figure of his Uzukage to look down at the genin standing with a hand wrapped around his elbow. True to character, Aki is the first to break the silence, though she keeps her voice soft in deference to Naruto, who is speaking with Haku again. Aki smiles up at him, restrained but still beaming, and tightens her grip on his arm in barely contained excitement. Her violet eyes are glowing, and she keeps darting quick, sharp glances at Konoha around them, curious and awed.

Something with him softens, and Gaara allows himself a faint smile in return. “It is,” he agrees. Aki and Natsu came to Uzushio from the mountains of Lightning Country, which are for the most part rocky and barren, and Uzushio itself tends more towards fields of grass and low scrub than Konoha’s massive forests. For one born and raised in such conditions, Konoha is a sight, and Gaara is well able to remember his own reaction to it after twelve years of life in Suna.

“There's not a lot of water,” Natsu points out, wrinkling his nose where he's hanging on to Gaara's weapon pouch. “My techniques are going to suck.”

Aki sticks her tongue out at him. “And that’s different from normal how?”

“Aki!” her twin protests, though he keeps his voice down. “If I can't do big water jutsus our strategies are ruined.”

That very nearly earns him a roll of Gaara’s eyes. If overcompensation is a genetically inheritable Uzumaki trait—and at this point Gaara is hardly willing to believe otherwise—Natsu has it in spades, as his Suiton techniques clearly show. Gaara suspects that as soon as the boy is in a position to have a nickname, someone will very quickly slap him with “Tsunami” or something very close to it.

“Konoha has rivers,” he counters. “And nearly as much moisture in the air as Uzushio. I am sure you will adapt, Natsu.”

Makoto says nothing, but his fingers lightly grip Gaara's sleeve, and Gaara reaches out with his free hand to gently ruffle the boy’s hair. He looks up and smiles, just a little, but Gaara is relieved to see that he doesn’t look nervous. For all his quietness, Makoto has nerves of steel.

Aki and Natsu have done enough fretting for all four of them, these past few days. Gaara is honestly astonished that neither he nor their father has drowned them in the ocean.

“How?!” Naruto suddenly squawks, making Gaara glance up curiously. The blond is glaring at Fū
Ah. That.

Fū beams back at him with that certain slant to her smile that reads you know you want to forgive me, look how sweet and adorable I am. “Weeelll,” she says, clasping her hands behind her back and rocking on her toes with a bright grin. “It wasn’t like there was that much of a choice, Naruto. I mean, Gaara and I had teams, so we couldn’t exactly stay, right?”

Gaara, meeting their gazes, one accusing and one entreating, crosses his arms over his chest and raises a brow. He wants no part in this argument.

Naruto crosses his arms as well, and shifts his stare to the tall, slender brunet half-hiding behind an unimpressed Karin. “Right,” he drawls, “except I distinctly remember making Utakata my jounin sub-commander. Going down the chain of command, he should have been left in charge.”

Fū snorts. “Yeah, and that worked for all of twenty minutes. The first time Karin and Suigetsu had a little misunderstanding in the marketplace—”

With a groan of abject horror, Naruto slaps a hand over his eyes and drags it downward as though to wipe the mental image away, even as Karin bristles and hisses, “Shut up, moron, it was entirely that idiot’s fault, I had no part in—”

“Anyway,” Fū barrels on with blind determination. “The western market kind of got a little flooded—”

Naruto mouths a little flooded with something like despair in his eyes.

“—and as soon as Utakata got the reports, he ordered cleanup crews to be sent out, then had what was either a temporary mental breakdown or a really impressive temper-tantrum—”

“I most certainly did not—”

“—declared that he would be accompanying us as a secondary bodyguard for the Uzukage, and then promptly abdicated and went to pack.”

Utakata tucks his hands into the sleeves of his yukata and very carefully doesn’t meet Naruto’s eyes. “I would have been terrible at the job,” he defends. “I have never wanted to be a Kage, Naruto-sama, even temporarily. I’m afraid I don’t have the constitution for it.”

Eyes narrowed, Naruto looks half a second away from calling bullshit when Fū adds cheerfully, “Since he wasn’t willing to do it, and since as soon as Roushi caught wind of everything he was overcome by a dire need to meditate and skipped out to go sit on the hill, we took a look at the emergency protocols and noticed that in a crisis the head of the hospital has the same authority as the sub-commander.”

“Kabuto?” Naruto demands, voice almost squeaking with horror. “You were going to leave Kabuto in charge of my village?”

“Relax, Naruto.” Fū waves a dismissive hand. “Kabuto must have heard what was going on, because by the time we got to the hospital to talk to him he’d locked it down and set up a three-block perimeter, and declared that anyone who tried to get through who wasn’t mortally wounded would be used for testing his newest batch of poisons.”

Naruto rubs a hand over his forehead, looking a little pale. “Of course he did,” he mutters. Gaara
honestly feels no sympathy. Uzushio is a madhouse on a good day, even with half of the weirdest shinobi gone. It is, after all, the source of Naruto's genetics. That alone should say more than enough.

Fū ticks people off her fingers. “So, me, Gaara, Utakata, Roushi, Kabuto…oh! Right. Frosty refused to stay behind when you were, and I quote, ‘being a reckless, irresponsible buffoon with the self-preservation instincts of a suicidal sparrow in a room full of cats’, and Karin insisted on coming so that we didn’t accidentally cause an international incident, so…that left us with just one choice, really! And Kimimaro just so happened to be in the village to visit Jūgo, and since you and Orochimaru cured him he's practically been an honorary citizen of Uzushio anyway, so it all worked out.”

“Kimimaro. In charge of Uzushio. I…I am going to have you all doing D-ranks for the next year;” Naruto growls, tangling his fingers in his hair as though attempting to pull it out. “All of you.”

If Gaara actually thought Naruto was going to go through with it, he might protest, but he knows Naruto won't. It was actually a fairly neat solution, and Gaara had long enough before their departure to brief the other man on what would probably go wrong, the hospital declaring itself a hostile territory aside. Kimimaro is fiercely loyal, after all, to Naruto just as much as Orochimaru now, and given that his partner has been living happily in Uzushio for the last five years, he has a vested interest in keeping the village intact.

From his position at Naruto's right shoulder, the Uchiha snorts softly. “I would like to formally rescind my sarcasm,” he says dryly. “Your life is very hard.”

Naruto sweeps them all with a glare that is nowhere near as intimidating as he likely thinks it is. “Your sympathy is appreciated,” he growls, and then addresses the rest of them. “You know, in other villages people fight over who gets to be Kage. They're willing to kill to get the position, even temporarily.”

“They,” Utakata says with feeling, “don’t live in a city full of Uzumaki.”

“Gaara handled it,” Naruto mutters, a little bit petulantly.

Gaara lets his eyebrow go back up as several people exchange glances. Aki stifles a giggle that he studiously pays no attention to.

With a bright laugh, Fū steps back to nudge him gently with a shoulder, and when he looks down at her with deeply buried amusement, she reaches up on her tip-toes and ruffles his hair. He bears it with as much dignity as he’s able, despite the way his genin are slyly laughing at him. “Yeah,” she says cheerfully, “and that would totally be a valid argument, except that over the years you’ve managed to infect Gaara, so he’s nearly as insane as you are. He just hides it better. Case in point: he sees absolutely nothing wrong with Kabuto attempting to secede the hospital from the rest of the village just to get out of being in charge for a month.”

Admittedly, Gaara does think of it as a rather neat solution in the face of an unwanted promotion, but he keeps his mouth shut. There's no need to give anyone here more ammunition.

“I am very amused by how you're excluding yourself from this madness,” Naruto informs her, but he’s grinning too, warm and bright and happy. Gaara looks at the way the Uchiha is standing shoulder-to-shoulder with him, and speculates how much that has to do with it. It’s not everything, certainly, given that Naruto so casually revealing his identity means Danzo has been dealt with, but…it’s likely a good portion of it.

Gaara wonders (if only to himself, and because Fū might have a point about Naruto's manner being...
infectious) if he can apply fairy tale logic here, and whether, since Naruto is obviously the dashing hero, that makes Uchiha the damsel. He conceals a smirk at the image.

The snap of heeled sandals on stone makes them turn to see the Hokage approaching, eyes narrowed in a look that promises retribution despite the polite smile fixed to her face. It is a truly eerie expression, and Gaara doesn’t blame his genin when they crowd a little bit closer, regardless of his sudden lack of personal space.

“Arashi?” she says, like it’s a threat.

Naruto gives her his best grin, even as he rubs sheepishly at the back of his neck. “Um, I go by either?” he says carefully. “Er, Uzushio wanted me to remember who I was when I was, uh… reincarnated, so…”

Gaara has heard Naruto explain his reincarnation many times of the years, and it’s never cohesive or rational. Then again, it’s Naruto doing the explaining, and the whole matter is entirely sensible from his point of view, so Gaara supposes he shouldn’t expect anything different. He snorts softly and adds, “I believe that, given the ties the Uzukage has to the chakra that is contained within Uzushio, the village has gained a form of sentience, and with the destruction caused by Kiri she was able to influence Arashi’s soul as he died.”

Naruto huffs and rolls his eyes. “Isn’t that what I just said?” he demands a little crossly.

“Badly, dobe,” Uchiha mutters, and receives a dark look in return that makes him smirk.

Tsunade stares at Naruto for a long moment, eyes hard, and the younger blond stiffens warily, taking a step back. Then, with a low growl and a muttered curse, Tsunade leans forward, grabs Naruto by the ear, and reels him into a tight hug.

“Naruto, you idiot,” she whispers, rough and choked.

Naruto’s eyes soften, and he smiles, wrapping his arms around her in return and squeezing gently. “Hey, Baa-chan,” he murmurs in return, and Gaara turns away a little to give them at least a bit of privacy.

A pair of wide teal eyes lock with his, and he feels rather like someone just shoved him hard. It is…not that he wasn’t expecting Temari’s presence, or that of Kankuro, who is standing at her shoulder. He’s known for years now that she bullied the council into giving her the position of Kazekage after her return to Suna—in large part so that she could have free rein to search for him. It’s simply…unexpected, that she would look like that, stunned and overwhelmed as she brings one hand up to cover her mouth, relief and dismay warring in her expression. She takes a step forward, Kankuro right behind her, and then hesitates.

“Sensei, sensei,” Aki whispers, pulling on his arm, and he looks down automatically at the red head just about level with his elbow. She looks back at him, wide-eyed and eager, and asks, “Is that your sister?”

“She’s pretty,” Makoto adds unexpectedly, amber eyes fixed on the Kazekage. “And she looks like you.”

Gaara isn’t quite sure how to respond to that, so he simply nods and looks up again, to see that Temari is still standing there, watching him nervously. Not because she thinks he’s going to snap and kill someone, because there’s no terror in her eyes, but…uncertainly. As if she doesn’t know how he’s going to respond to her presence.
Small hands push him a step forward, and Gaara glances back down at his genin, arching a silent brow. Natsu grins back at him, and says, “Don’t you want to see her, Sensei? She’s your sister.”

“Sisters are awesome,” Aki agrees with a matching grin, and joins her twin in urging him another step forward. “Especially older sisters.”

“By seven minutes!” Natsu protests, though he doesn’t stop pushing even when Aki sticks her tongue out at him again.

“Seven and a half,” Makoto murmurs, half a second before Aki can. He moves to the side, leaving Gaara’s path forward open, and though he doesn’t join his teammates in attempting to shove Gaara closer, he clearly isn’t going to stop them.

Gaara looks down at the three faces turned up at him, and that softness is back, warm and gentle at the core of his being. They are…good children, and he is incredibly, unspeakably grateful that he’s had even this much of a hand in the creation of their current selves. Wordlessly, he reaches out to run a hand over Aki’s long crimson hair, nearly the color of his own, and then ruffles Natsu’s shorter locks. He rests a hand on Makoto’s head, and then pulls free of their grasp, stepping forward.

Temari is still watching him, eyes even wider than before as she glances between him and the rest of Team One. The hesitation in her face registers with a faint pang for Gaara—not of hurt, but of relief. He remembers, barely a week ago, contemplating how his life would have gone had he returned to Suna, how it would have taken years to earn what Naruto offered so quickly. How he likely never would have known the trials and joys of trying to turn three children into true shinobi.

Looking back, despite all the hard work, all the hardship of rebuilding a village from nothing and then trying to repopulate it with a people more used to being rootless nomads than a cohesive village, Gaara doesn’t believe he would choose any differently if given the chance.

Naruto is caught up in his own reunion, but Haku is watching, and he unobtrusively takes up position right behind Gaara’s team, smiling faintly. Gaara nods his thanks, then turns towards his siblings and steps forward, one pace and then another, until he’s halfway across the space between them. It’s only then that Temari moves, quickly striding forward with Kankuro right behind her, until there are only a few feet of air separating them.

“Temari,” Gaara says, looking down at her, and it’s truly a surprise to be taller. “Congratulations on becoming Kazekage.” He doesn’t offer a hug, or even a handshake, because despite how she and Kankuro relaxed around him after Suna’s failed invasion they were never that close.

Temari stares at him for a long moment, and though her eyes are wet her face is dry. She takes a short breath, and then reaches up to brush his hair away from the tattoo over his left eye.

“Did you find it?” she asks softly.

Gaara reaches up, tangling his hand with hers to press their fingers against the kanji for love. “I did,” he answers with a faint smile, and doesn’t have to look back over his shoulder at the family he chose. Naruto and Haku, Utakata and Karin, Fū and her genin, Aki, Natsu, and Makoto, Uzumaki Gin and Team Two, Ookami Koto and Team Four—they’re his people in bond and deed. Kankuro and Temari will always be his blood, but they aren’t his only family anymore. “I am…happy. Uzushio makes me happy.”

Temari smiles back at him, warm and sweet, and then wraps her arms around his neck and pulls him down into a tight and entirely unexpected hug. Gaara blinks, but after a moment he lets his arms come up to encircle her lightly in return. A strong hand closes over his shoulder, and he glances up
from his sister's bowed head to see Kankuro smiling too, broad and relieved. As soon as Temari steps back, he takes her place, wrapping Gaara up in a bear hug that nearly lifts him off his feet. That truly startles Gaara, because Kankuro always shied away from him more than most, even more than Temari with her forced calm and stiff attempts at kindness.

But Gaara has no urge to reach for his sand when people touch him. Naruto cured him of that through more than just adjusting Shukaku’s seal. Touch and closeness are no longer things Gaara shies away from; he doesn’t expect pain to come of such simple things as warmth and kindness anymore. Instead, he hugs Kankuro back, and thinks that even if he has chosen his own family, surely his original one can be a part of that, too.

Utakata watches Gaara's reunion with his siblings with a faint smile, arms folded over his chest. There are eyes on him, sharp and intent, but he knows their source and ignores them easily enough. He is done with Kiri, and has no wish to involve himself in their politics, even in a roundabout manner.

Haku is watching him as well, one eyebrow slightly raised though his expression is perfectly polite, and Utakata ignores him as well. He is aware that it won’t last long, this attempt at avoidance, but even the mention of Kiri stirs up a whirlwind of feelings within him, hardly tempered by what time has passed. Betrayal is still at the forefront, an ache and an open, gaping wound that has barely managed to scab over. Uzushio has helped, has healed him more than Utakata had ever thought would be possible before Naruto and Gaara had found him near Mount Katsuragi. But it is not a blanket cure-all, and can’t erase the past so easily.

“They seem interested,” Haku ventures after a moment, his tone thoughtful.

Utakata just flicks him a look. “Mm,” he hums noncommittally, wondering what he’ll have to do to get the Hyotan user to drop the subject. He isn’t entirely certain what the other Kiri native is pushing for; if Haku thinks Utakata is going to return to Water Country at the first hint of welcome from the new Mizukage, he’s gravely mistaken. Utakata left for a reason just as valid as Haku’s, and that will never change.

“Look sharp,” Ookami Koto murmurs, sounding vaguely amused, the way she always does. She’s standing with her team, casual and languid, looking far too lovely and poised to be the elite jounin that she is. There are not many Ookami left, as most of them fell during the invasion, but Koto is the uncontested matriarch despite only being in her late twenties. Given that Kabuto is one of her clan, and never argued with her appointment, Utakata has always felt he’s fully justified in his wariness of her.

When he turns his attention to her, halfway poised to step away from a trick of some sort, Koto just tips her head in the direction of the Kiri contingent, and Utakata has to swallow a grimace. Lovely. Just what he’s always wanted. A reunion of his own.

When he turns back, the Mizukage is only a few feet from him, looking entirely unamused. Ao is at her heels, which is a faint surprise—Utakata had thought him loyal to the station of Uzukage, rather than the person under the hat, and to be permitted a position so close to the Mizukage it’s likely he was a part of the rebellion. What isn’t a surprise is that Ao looks just as displeased as Terumi Mei to see him standing with the others from Uzushio.

“Mizukage-sama,” Utakata says politely, because he knows his duty to his village, and not insulting one of their neighbors—no matter how much he wants to ignore them, and no matter how easily he
believes Uzushio, with its five jinchuuriki and reincarnated Storm God, could level them in a fight—is likely a good start.

“Utakata,” Mei returns, sharp-eyed and perfectly civil. “You’ve been giving my hunter-nin a number of headaches, I’ll have you know. But you’re looking well. The spitting image of your father.”

Utakata doesn’t bristle, but it’s a near thing. His father was the Sandaime Mizukage, and chose to have Saiken sealed within him for much the same reason Gaara’s father turned his son into a jinchuuriki. It’s hardly a safe subject with which to open a conversation.

“Ah,” he says, keeping his tone even with effort. “I see I failed to form you of my whereabouts. An oversight, but I have been rather preoccupied of late. Uzushio must be my first priority, given my position. After all, I cannot let my village down.”

Mei snorts, and the tension eases from her features as she rocks back on her heels and crosses her arms over her chest. One corner of her mouth is quirked up in something very close to a smile. “Well,” she says, eyes flickering over Gaara, Fū, and Naruto, “at least I know you’re in good company.”

“The best,” Utakata agrees after a beat, and Mei smirks at him, then turns and sweeps back to her second guard, who looks nervous and a little jumpy. A kind word from her has him flushing and coming to attention, then hurrying to fall into step as she heads deeper into the village.

Utakata watches her go, not entirely certain what just happened.

From where he’s still standing firm, Ao snorts, clearly amused at the expression on Utakata’s face. When Utakata glances back at him in question, he just shakes his head. “She’s right,” is all he says, studying the younger man with a brusque once-over. “You look better.”

The last time Ao saw him was just after Harusame betrayed him, stumbling away from his master’s body and disappearing into the mists. Utakata would like to believe he is worlds away from that raw, wounded man, who was entirely ready to wage a war against the rest of humanity.

Harusame and Ao had been friends once, Utakata knows. He can recall dragging them both home from the bar more than once, aggravated and embarrassed, and how Ao was the one to teach him tracking. To Kiri, to Terumi Mei, Utakata owes nothing but bitter loathing. But Ao…perhaps there is a tie there, tentative as it may be.

…I am,” he agrees, fingering the stem of the pipe concealed in his sleeve. “Uzushio is…a place that is good for finding peace, both within and without.”

Ao nods, looking a little awkward, and then jerks his head at Haku and Fū. “They came out to warn us off. You weren’t invited?”

Utakata remembers the way Haku fumed at the witlessness of their Kiri watchers, annoyed by the fact that no opposition was offered to take his mind off Naruto, and smiles. He hadn’t known it was Ao who was leading the mission. “Despite appearances,” he says with amusement, watching how Haku is pointedly ignoring their conversation despite being only a few meters away, “that was a diplomatic approach. It was assumed that my presence might cause unnecessary conflict.”

“Diplomatic,” Ao repeats dubtfully, and shakes his head again with a grunt. He looks back at Utakata, expression turning contemplative, and then says quietly, “I don’t know if anyone ever told you, but Harusame only wanted the best for you. Living with that thing—”

Saiken answers the insult with a flare of angry chakra, and Utakata takes a step back, laying a hand
over his chest and reaching for his connection with the bijuu. ‘Peace. He is only ignorant.’

‘He’s rude,’ Saiken retorts, but settles himself regardless.

Utakata snorts softly, and waves off Naruto and Fū, who have both turned to him with concern, before returning his attention to Ao. “He attempted to kill me,” he says coolly. “That makes it rather hard to take your words to heart. Believe me, life with Saiken is much preferable to a gruesome death during his extraction. If Harusame thought otherwise, he was a fool.”

Ao sighs with clear exasperation, tugging on one of his earrings in frustration. “Maybe. An optimistic fool, I’ll give you that. He thought to remove…Saiken and let you live a normal life, but something went wrong.”

Utakata turns his face away, wondering at the sharp ache within him. Was it always as simple as that? Not betrayal, but a misguided attempt to help?

That would…be very like his old master.

‘Saiken?’ he asks silently.

The bijuu offers up a confusing jumble of regret and vindication and sympathy and remorse, all tied together with a few scattered images of the doomed ritual. Utakata is nowhere near as skilled with seals as Fū and Naruto, but he’s learned enough to recognize what several of the arrays mean, and it would…fit.

He isn’t entirely sure he wants it to.

“Well, think about it,” Ao mutters a touch gruffly, stepping back with an awkward half-wave. “You know where to find me if you’d like to talk.”

Utakata nods, unable to find the appropriate words, and watches the man leave at a double-time march, clearly eager to get away from the unmanly sentiment clouding the air.

It is certainly not how Utakata expected his encounter with the Kiri contingent to go, but that’s most likely for the better.

He turns away, looks back at his Uzukage so bright and warm to find Naruto watching him carefully, and smiles at the boy who gave him a home. Naruto beams back, relieved and happy for him, and Utakata finally allows himself to think on Ao’s words, though he refuses to dwell on them too long.

Whatever happened back then, he’s in a better place now, and despite his regrets, he has no desire to change his life. Not when it’s led him here, to this.

That is, of course, the exact moment that foreign chakra surges, rising all the way to the overcast sky in an eruption of violet light, noise, fire, and scattering rubble as a large stretch of Konoha’s northern wall explodes.
Fourth Movement: Lost Son's Theme, Stringendo

[Theme: A melodic or sometimes harmonic idea presented in musical form.

Stringendo: Tightening, narrowing; i.e. played with a pressing forward or acceleration of the tempo.]

There's barely half a second of silence before movement overtakes the square. Tsunade releases Naruto from a second hug, her spine drawing up straight like a string's been pulled, and steps away.

“TENZO!” she calls, and in a blue of grey and black an ANBU is kneeling beside her. “REPORT!”

Naruto doesn’t look at the ANBU, though; he turns his eyes to Karin, who has dropped to the ground and closed her eyes. Gin is hovering over her, twin dao swords in hand and expression cautious, but he steps back as Naruto strides over. “KARIN?” Naruto asks softly, falling to one knee beside the redhead woman.


“All one person,” Naruto finishes grimly, rising to his feet again. “PEIN.”

Pein means Akatsuki, and Naruto had been hoping beyond all rationality that the group would hold off, would give them a month’s reprieve during the Chuunin Exams, but apparently that was a foolish wish. There are worse places and times that Akatsuki could have come upon them, but honestly, Naruto can't think of many. Four of the remaining seven jinchuuriki all gathered in one village, together with four Kages and the majority of each village’s genin—it’s hardly a desirable battlefield, though their odds could certainly be worse.

Karin glances up at him, gone pale behind her glasses and loose fall of hair. “The group to the west is large, but they're the same way. WEAKER, DEFINITELY, BUT...THEY FEEL LIKE CLONES OF ONE OF THE PAIR CURRENTLY IN THE EAST, AND THEY'RE CLOSING ON THE VILLAGE. FIVE HUNDRED, MAYBE MORE. I THINK IT’S KONAN LEADING THEM.”

Naruto closes his eyes, drawing up and discarding strategies with all the speed his mind possesses, honed over two lives as Uzukage. “TWO TOGETHER, ONE LIKE THE CLONES—PROBABLY MADARA AND ZETSU,” he murmurs. “THOSE MUST BE THE WHITE ZETSU CLONES OROCHIMARU MENTIONED, BUT I THOUGHT HE SAID THEY NEEDED THE POWER OF THE REMAINING BIJUU TO FINISH THEM.”

“APPEARENTLY HE WAS MISTAKEN,” Haku murmurs, taking his place at Naruto's side. “OR THE POWER OF TWO BIJUU WAS SUFFICIENT FOR FIVE HUNDRED CLONES. THE VILLAGE—”


“TAKE THEM WEST,” Naruto interrupts, looking around at his shinobi, all poised and waiting. “WE’LL HELP. GAARA, FU, YOU HAVE PEIN. TRY TO STALL HIS PATHS AS LONG AS POSSIBLE. UTAKATA, TAKE KONAN. KOTO, YOU'RE HIS BACKUP.”

Gaara steps away from his siblings with a silent nod, sand hissing out to form a disk beneath his feet. He arches a brow at Fū, who grins viciously and leaps into the air, beetle wings shimmering into
existence behind her as she rises, and then salutes. “A chance to punch out the freaks who’ve been making our lives miserable? Our pleasure, Uzukage-sama,” she says brightly, and then takes off in a blur with Gaara right behind her.

The snap of a book closing draws Naruto's eyes, and he meets Kakashi's long stare with surprise, even as his old teacher says politely, “Hokage-sama, if you’ll allow it, I think I would do best heading north as well.”

Tsunade hesitates for a bare moment, clearly weighing the options, and then nods. “Tenzo, go with him,” she orders, waving the ANBU off, and both men bow and then dart away.

As they vanish among the buildings, Koto hums and slings her heavy flail over one shoulder, tossing her long grey ponytail free of the thick chain. “You and me, Utakata-san,” she says evenly, though her dark eyes are wary. “Care to lead the way?”

“Of course, Ookami-san,” Utakata answers, drawing his pipe from his sleeve. A moment later, a whirl of bubbles surrounds them and lifts them into the air, headed towards where screams are already rising.

Hopefully they’ll make it in time. Hopefully anyone will.

But there's no time, and Naruto hates this, hates the way his blood is pounding and his head is spinning with what if I give them the wrong orders what if we’re not strong enough what if they die, but he doesn’t have the luxury of doubt right now. He takes a breath, steels himself for a very brief and dirty argument, and looks back at Haku, who’s watching him narrowly. “The hospital,” he says, and can just see Haku's hackles going up. “Haku, that’s an order. They're going to need all the medics they can get. Teams One, Two, Four, and Six, you're with him. Each squad, find a medic team and protect them. Go.”

Because he knows, because even if he mothers he still trusts Naruto to a degree that Naruto has never quite understood, Haku gives him a long, nearly desperate look, but goes without another word.

The group has shrunk almost to nothing now, and Naruto looks between Gin and Karin, both family in blood as well as by choice, both waiting for their orders. He doesn’t want to give them, because there’s a screaming in the back of his head that sounds very much like Uzushio, like grief and pain and blood pooling in the gutters as a kunai slits his throat, but he pushes it back, shoves it down, and summons up his best smile for them. “Karin, get somewhere central and find some chuunin to guard you and run messages. I want you to keep your eyes on the battle and watch the flow. Don’t let them take us by surprise.”

A throat clears, and Shikamaru reaches in to offer Karin a hand. “I’ll take her to my father,” he offers. “He’s the Chief Strategist. A sensor with a range like hers will be invaluable.”

Karin flushes dull red, but takes the hand and lets Shikamaru pull her to her feet. “Don’t do anything stupid, Naruto,” she warns sharply, adjusting her glasses, and then turns and stalks away before he can respond. With a roll of his eyes and a mutter of, “Troublesome women,” Shikamaru follows, though his pace is far quicker than his usual lazy stroll.

“Uzukage-sama?” Gin asks quietly.

Naruto turns to find the tall, muscular jounin all but hovering over him. He slaps his smile back on and says with all the cheer he can muster, “Sorry, Gin, I'm sending you back to Uzushio. Put the village on alert, find Roushi, and have Anzu gather as many jounin and ANBU teams as possible to
send through. Roushi can reopen the seal for you. I get the feeling we’re going to need all the reinforcements we can find.”

The man looks far from happy, but he nods, remaining in the center of the seal as Naruto takes three steps back, pulling Sasuke with him. A few drops of blood and the seal glows again, hiding Gin completely. When the light clears, he’s gone.

With a whirl of auburn hair and blue cloth, Mei drops from the roof of one of the surrounding buildings and strides across the square, marching right up to stand with Tsunade. “My jounin will help thin that army some,” she says, cracking her knuckles as a bloodthirsty smile curls her lips. Naruto has wondered before how a woman was able to pull the Bloody Mist back up from its descent into savagery without getting assassinated within the first week, but apparently the answer is that’s she’s fucking terrifying. “Got something fun in mind for the two of us, Tsunade-sama?”

“The three of us,” a voice puts in sharply as Temari joins them, tossing her traditional robes to the side without care as she shoulders her huge battle fan. Her glare dares either of the older women to comment.

Mei just grins. “Thatta girl,” she laughs. “Finally the female Kage equal the number of male Kage. It’s time we show them just how we earned our hats, don’t you think?”

Tsunade smiles despite herself, letting her own robes fall to the side, then straightening her green haori and flexing her fingers. “Good idea,” she agrees, and turns her head towards the army of White Zetsu. “If those bastards get into my village, I’m going to be very unhappy. But four Kage against three hundred clones sounds like good odds to me.”

“Three Kage,” Naruto corrects, drawing the scroll containing Sāji from his obi and unsealing the naginata in a whirl of smoke. He meets Tsunade's startled eyes steadily. “Madara is the one orchestrating this whole thing. If I take him out, Akatsuki is leaderless.”

A hand closes around his elbow, firm and unyielding, and Naruto half-turns to find Sasuke right beside him, expression set into impossibly stubborn lines. “We,” he bites out. “Madara is an Uchiha. As Clan Head, killing him is my responsibility. And like hell I'm letting you go alone, dobe.”

Naruto hesitates, torn. Whenever he’s pictured himself facing Madara—which is more often than he would like, especially in his nightmares—he’s always done it alone. That’s risk enough, putting the most powerful of the bijuu directly in Madara’s path and at risk of being controlled. Besides, the others need to face Pein, to hold him off as long as possible. Naruto wouldn’t dare call on them for help.

But…

“Stop it, Naruto,” Sasuke says, low and fierce, pulling Naruto fully around and not allowing him to look away. “We’re doing this together.”

And Naruto…smiles. Because he’s always thought of doing this alone, but he doesn’t have to right now. Sasuke isn’t one of the bijuu, isn’t at risk of having his free will stolen as easily as breathing. He isn’t as powerful, maybe, but he’s trained with Jiraiya, reached ANBU, survived eight years as an active shinobi, and Naruto is willing to believe that here at least the benefits will outweigh the risks.

Not that he’ll actually get a choice in the matter, judging by the set of Sasuke’s jaw.

“All right,” he says, letting out a long, slow breath. He’s never believed that locking his precious
people up in some glass tower is the best way to keep them safe. Better to fight side by side and protect them from up close, rather than shutting them away and earning their hatred. “All right, Sasuke, let’s go.”

He doesn’t say thank you. Sasuke would probably hit him if he did, because it’s not a situation where thanks are applicable, or even remotely appropriate. This is Sasuke's village, his home, and he’s simply defending it. It’s just common sense.

Sasuke kisses him for it anyways, brief and hot and over all too soon.

“Be careful,” Tsunade says softly, her gaze flickering between the two of them, and Naruto grins at her—not forced, not false, but real, because for all the fear within him, for all the doubt that wants to eat at his heart, for all the screams he can hear and all the darkness of Pein’s twisted conviction filling the air, they’re…not doomed. Not even close. Four jinchuuriki, four Kage, a host of each village’s strongest jounin—he likes those odds. Akatsuki is desperate to find the bijuu, to start their attempt at conquering the world, and seven years with only rumors and brief glimpses to go by has pushed them to this. To a mere hope that Uzushio, with its entirely hidden village, holds the clues they need.

A reckless, desperate enemy is one poised on the edge of defeat, and Naruto is more than ready to give Akatsuki that final push over the precipice.

“Always, Baa-chan,” he says brightly, stepping forward to wrap his arms around her in a tight hug that she returns with equal fervor. “Kick their asses, okay?”

She flicks him gently in the forehead, just enough to make him stagger, and then leans forward to press a quick kiss to the same spot. “Of course, brat,” she murmurs, and then turns her smile on Sasuke. “Come back in one piece, both of you. Heaven knows I've already patched you up enough for one lifetime, Uchiha.”

Sasuke rolls his eyes faintly, but steps back and bows. “Yes, Hokage-sama. Come on, dobe. Let’s go.”

Naruto doesn’t look back as he follows Sasuke up onto the rooftops and to the east. He wouldn’t even if he could, but regardless there isn’t time; already there are more explosions, more screams. The smell of fire sears the air, ash and scorched wood and hot stone, and Naruto redoubles his pace, Sasuke right in step with him.

“Plan?” he calls, and Naruto grimaces.

“Hit him hard and don’t die?” he suggests, and rolls his eyes at the withering look that earns him. “Teme! It’s Madara, or at least someone pretending to be him. And Zetsu is hardly an easy opponent, either. Do you have a better idea?”

“Pretending?” Sasuke demands, sounding outraged, even as they flash past a huddle of jounin surrounding a medic team and leap over the battered wall. “Dobe, why the hell would anyone pretend to be a dead, universally hated missing-nin?”

As they drop lightly to the ground, Naruto shrugs, settling Sāji to rest over his shoulder with careless ease. “Don’t ask me,” he says with a huff, and jerks his head at the pair of shinobi in front of them. “They might know, though.”

The masked man turns away from the battered ANBU in front of him, smoothly shifting his attention to Naruto as the shinobi drops, unconscious or dead. “Ah,” he says after a moment, though if he’s startled it doesn’t show. “The Kyuubi jinchuuriki. I was wondering when you would crawl out of
Sasuke growls low in his throat, chakra rising around him. It fills the air with the smell of ozone, sharp and metallic in the back of Naruto's throat. He tenses as well, ready to move, and lets Sāji fall to rest in both hands. A sweep of his thumb over the largest seal activates it, sending blue and red chakra spiraling down the shaft as the seals come to life. Within him, Kurama rises as well, adding his chakra to Naruto's without being asked and baring his sharp teeth in a bone-rattling snarl.

“Sorry,” Naruto tells Madara—or the man playing at being Madara—cheerfully, though he keeps a wary eye on Zetsu as well. “I was a little busy rebuilding my village. I guess I forgot you were looking for me.”

At that moment, chakra flares at three other points in Konoha, familiar and welcome, as the other jinchuuriki activate their Version 2 forms, cloaking themselves in the bijuu’s power. Madara’s chakra flickers with angry surprise, just the barest edge of killing intent leaking out, but it’s enough to make Naruto grin with barely contained triumph. The missing-nin had no idea that the jinchuuriki would be here. This was obviously a long shot, a blow struck against Konoha in the hopes of drawing the jinchuuriki out and getting information, but Madara didn’t expect them to already be present. Especially not in the current numbers.

“My,” Madara says, drawing himself up as chakra flares, and Naruto tightens his grip on his naginata. “Such hope you have of winning, Uzumaki Naruto. But there is no such thing as a victory in this world. Hope is merely an illusion.”

“I know about your plan, Madara,” Naruto counters. “A false world? Will hope be real there? Will it mean anything at all when all of reality is an illusion? This world right now is painful, but it’s real. It has meaning. And I won’t let you take that away. I won’t let this world end! You have my word, and that’s one thing I’ll never go back on!”

Zetsu scoffs, but before he can even make a move Sasuke lunges forward, the cries of a thousand birds echoing through the forest, and slams into the man, the momentum hurling them back into the woods and out of sight. Madara turns his head to watch them disappear, but doesn’t otherwise move.

“You would condemn your friends to an existence filled with pain?” he asks. “To a life of struggle where they will never fulfil their dreams? Surely you aren’t that cruel, Naruto. But it doesn’t matter. I’ll end this world, and lead you to a new one.”

He vanishes with a warping spiral of force, disappears completely from Naruto's senses, and Naruto —

He can't breathe. Can barely move to spin and dodge the dozens of kunai hurled at him with an inhuman amount of force, because he knows that move. He’s faced it before.

*Kamui*, he thinks, wild with sudden understanding, with realization and hope and aching, ironic comprehension.

They’d been sparring, Kagami and him, back when Uzushio still stood untouched. Back when Naruto was newly appointed Sandai Uzukage. As ever, they went all out, full force brought to bear against each other, because they were both geniuses in their own right, sons of some of the most powerful bloodlines their villages could boast, and they’d never even attempted to hold back when they sparred. There had been a moment of inattention on Naruto's part, though, a shout from the wall that pulled his gaze away for a split second, too long to be able to dodge but not long enough for Kagami to be able to stop.
He’d gotten a katana through the chest, and had staggered back, blood already bubbling from his lips as Kagami stared at him in horror, eyes shifting and settling into sharp-edged pinwheels spinning lazily, the power in them fierce and overwhelming.

Naruto had survived, of course—Uzumaki vitality was never something to be underestimated—but Kagami had thought for a very long, fraught hour that he had killed his best friend, and he had the Mangekyo to show for it.

It was that Mangekyo in particular that made his family line so valued, even among the rest of the Uchiha Clan. What made them marry him to Hisae, what made his father push him so often, so overbearingly, that Kagami had gladly left Konoha behind to take up position as ambassador to Uzushio, far away from any relatives. It was an ability last seen in the Warring Clans era and only ever in one particular branch of the Clan, but the renown of it had carried down the generations, despite the fact that after his great-great-grandfather only Kagami ever manifested it.

My bloodline? You mean what those old, wrinkled bastards can't understand, will never understand! It's not like there's more than an infinitesimal chance of me passing it on, even if I do what they want and 'reproduce for the good of the clan'.

But apparently he did pass it on. Even mixed with Senju blood, it appeared in his son, who is not years dead as Naruto had thought, but…living. Alive. Here.

“Obito,” he says, and the name of Kagami’s son echoes in the sudden silence around them. Naruto meets the startled gaze just visible through the eye-hole of the mask, the familiar elongated triangles twisted into a pinwheel, and can't tell if he’s overjoyed or horrified. “You're not Madara, you're Obito.”

“Look, teme, I'm just as delighted as the next guy that you're feeling inspired, but is this really the time to indulge in some sand art?”

Orochimaru rolls his eyes, as is likely to be expected, and scratches in the last few sweeping lines of the seal he’s drawing. It’s large and complex, and Jiraiya is kind of getting hives just looking at it, it’s so creepy. “They seem to have gotten to the exciting part without waiting for us to arrive,” the Snake Sage says archly, dusting off his hands and drawing another scroll from his weapons pouch. “I'm simply…evening the odds a little. Surely your honor has no problem with that, Jiraiya.”

Jiraiya eyes the bound forms of the five strange green clones struggling in the middle of the seal, and then looks at his former teammate with a skeptical expression.

Orochimaru waves him off with a huff. “They're hardly even clones, Jiraiya. They are artificial humans made from Hashirama's DNA and the Demonic Statue of the Outer Paths, and cultivated to serve as Akatsuki’s ground troops. This would be why Madara, Konan, and Pein ran when we faced them—they were preparing for an invasion, and didn’t want us to delay it.”

That is…something of a relief, though Jiraiya still doesn’t let himself relax fully. “And this is…?” he asks pointedly, waving a hand at the seal.

“Edo Tensei,” Orochimaru says, almost reverently, drawing five vials from a pocket and unfurling the scroll. “The greatest cheat of death that exists. Resurrection with all powers, abilities, personality, and memories intact. Using living bodies as a host, the summoned soul is called back to earth and reformed in the body it wore during life, with the ability to regenerate endlessly and no mortal weaknesses. Perfection found in the escape from death’s grasp.”
If Jiraiya didn’t know better, he’d say Orochimaru was talking about some kind of religious experience. Or possibly really good sex.

“You,” Jiraiya informs him dryly, “are exceedingly creepy.”

That gets him a glare and an affronted hiss, and Orochimaru rises smoothly to his feet, tossing his long hair back over his shoulder. Some of it smacks Jiraiya square in the face, but after so many years enduring Orochimaru’s little tantrums as a child, Jiraiya just rolls his eyes and takes a step to the side. His gaze is drawn back to the seal as Orochimaru activates the scroll, and the clones begin to scream.

“Who are you calling back?” he asks, crossing his arms over his chest and attempting to ignore the noise. “Will they help us?”

Orochimaru flicks him a short, withering glare before returning his attention to the seal just as the clones’ bodies are obscured by ash and dust. “Use what brain you have left, Jiraiya,” he scoffs, but it’s not necessary. Jiraiya can see the bodies forming, the familiar spiky blond hair, the helmeted head, the happuri faceguard bearing Konoha’s mark, the red headband and long dark hair. His breath catches in his throat, and he’s stunned to silence before four of the greatest shinobi ever to call Konoha home.

All of the previous Hokage stare back at him, obviously just as surprised at being called as he is to see them, and the silence stretches out between them.

“What?” an unfamiliar voice demands, and Jiraiya blinks, gaze drawn to the fifth shinobi in the line. He blinks again, because it’s not a Kage, not even anyone he’s familiar with—an Uchiha, by the coloring, but stockier than most, short and muscular rather than tall and lean, with chin-length dark hair cut at a slant. He’s middle-aged, not quite old but not young either, dressed in fine robes with a Konoha hitai-ate looped loosely around his waist.

The stranger shakes himself and takes a half-step forward, surveying the four Hokage with sharp eyes that catch and hold on Sarutobi. “Is that Hiruzen?” he asks incredulously.

Sarutobi stares back at him, blankly startled, and then takes his own step forward. “Kagami?” he returns, something like grief crossing his face. “You are…you look…” He trails off, clearly unsure how to finish that statement.

Orochimaru snorts, pulling six pairs of eyes to him in an instant. “Welcome back,” he says sardonically. “I see freeing my arms from the Shinigami’s stomach had the happy side effect of freeing you as well. As I hoped.”

Tobirama narrows his eyes, glancing down to study the seal at their feet. “Edo Tensei,” he affirms, looking…pleased? Jiraiya would have honestly expected him to be pissed, after being pulled from his eternal rest. “You have perfected it. My compliments.”

That earns him an actual, delighted smile, the likes of which Jiraiya hasn’t seen from Orochimaru since they were first learning ninjutsu. “Thank you, Nidaime-sama,” Orochimaru replies, astonishingly polite. “It is my honor to use such an innovative jutsu. But we have little time. Konoha is under attack, and in need of aid. Will you help?”

“You are helping Konoha?” Sarutobi crosses his arms over his chest, clearly suspicious. His gaze darts from Orochimaru to Jiraiya, standing unharmed and unmoving, and then back to the Snake Sannin. “Even after—?”
“Yes, sensei,” Jiraiya jumps in, tearing his gaze away from his former student, before Orochimaru can say anything. Tact isn’t really his strong point. “I’ll vouch for him. But we need to move. Akatsuki is already in the village.”

Orochimaru snorts softly. “And if you won’t take Jiraiya’s word, ask your esteemed teacher just how simple it would be to strip you of your will and leave you a mindless puppet,” he says sharply, already turning away. “And then note how I have refrained from doing so, no matter how straightforward it would make all of this.”

Jiraiya sighs aggrievedly, following his teammate over to where Itachi lies, still immobile. “Orochimaru,” he complains. “I know you’ve got more lives than a zombie cat, but how about we don’t go around aggravating the incredibly powerful Kages, especially since two of them are Gods of Shinobi and the other two might as well be. Oh, and you managed to piss off at least two of them when they were alive.”

Orochimaru pointedly ignores him, and Jiraiya throws up his hands in exasperation, wondering why he even bothers.

There’s a muttered curse from the far end of the line. “And what am I?” Kagami demands testily. “Chopped liver?”

“Now, now, Uchiha-san,” Hashirama says cheerfully. “If you were summoned with the rest of us, I’m sure you’re quite powerful as well.”

But when Jiraiya glances back, he can see that Kagami isn’t paying the least bit of attention to the Shodaime. Instead, his eyes are fixed on the cloud-swathed sky, lips parted as though he’s come to a sudden and welcome realization. With a grin spreading across his features, he drops his gaze, meeting Sarutobi’s eyes squarely.

“Arashi,” he says in stunned, overjoyed disbelief.

Sarutobi is smiling too—almost grinning, and he turns to look west, where chakra is flaring, sharp-edged and as strong as a storm wind. “It is indeed,” he agrees. “Orochimaru, you resurrected the Storm God to fight with us?”

Orochimaru steps back, letting Itachi sit up unsteadily, and his lips curve into a secretive smile. “Well, something like that,” he murmurs, and then crosses his arms to study the younger Uchiha closely. “Get up,” he orders. “If Uzushio is here, then Danzo has been dealt with, and I have no doubt Naruto has papered the village with proof of his crimes. If, as I suspect, he was the catalyst behind the massacre, you are likely no longer a missing-nin. And even if you are still wanted, it is probably for nothing more than questioning. Given such circumstances, what will you do now, Uchiha?”

Itachi is frozen, stiff and still, and says nothing. Orochimaru nods as though it’s an answer and turns away, meeting Jiraiya’s startled gaze with a sly smile and an expectantly raised brow.

“Naruto?” Jiraiya demands, the name echoed half a heartbeat afterwards by the stunned Yondaime.

Orochimaru chuckles, even as he heads into the trees. “Shall we find Tsunade, Jiraiya?” he suggests, ignoring his teammate’s dangerous glare. “I find that I’m feeling rather…nostalgic today.”

About to demand answers, Jiraiya pauses and then slowly shuts his mouth. He finds himself picturing it, almost against his will—Tsunade on one side of him, Orochimaru on the other, fighting shoulder-to-shoulder once again in order to protect Konoha. The image is…timeless, in a way.
They’ve done it so many times before, and even though Jiraiya had thought such things lost with Orochimaru’s betrayal—

But apparently not. Apparently, all that was necessary to bring it back was the return of Uzushio’s Storm God and his fierce conviction, coupled with a large enough threat.

Even with the danger to Konoha and its people, Jiraiya can't quite bring himself to regret these circumstances. Not really.

With a grin, he jogs after Orochimaru and slings an arm around him. “Sure,” he says, squeezing the thin shoulders fondly. “Let’s go kick their asses. They got away once, and that’s one time too many!”

“If you shout in my ear again, you brainless fool, I’ll bury you alive as worm food.”

“Sorry, sorry. Oh, hey! I bet I can take more out than you.”

“…The usual odds, I assume?”

“A week of servitude? Hah, you bet your pasty ass those are still the odds.”

“Very well. Prepare yourself, Jiraiya. This will be over with humiliating speed. For you, of course”

“Shut up, bastard! When I win, you’ll be the humiliated one, I promise you that.”

Sarutobi watches them go, then presses a hand over his eyes, muttering resignedly to himself. Tobirama catches the phrase “maid costume” and raises a disbelieving brow as his brother laughs delightedly, slapping Kagami on the shoulder before he takes off for Konoha at a bounding run.

“Naruto?” Minato repeats plaintively, even as the others follow after the Shodaime.
Fourth Movement: Courante for a New Conflict

Chapter Notes

I am an awful, awful person for being so late, but one of the joys of the Christmas season is unexpected family visits. One of my older brothers appeared without warning and decided to drag my twin and me around the city regardless of our protests. Someday, I will kill him and hide the body where it will never be found. The rest of my siblings will help. Shh.

Courante: (literally ‘running’) A piece of music written in triple time; also a fast-paced dance from the baroque period.

“You know, I'm starting to get this weird suspicion that we got the short end of the stick here.”

Ignoring Fū with the ease of long practice, Gaara calls up a wall of sand to block a missile from the Asura Path, drops and rolls to avoid a blow from one of the Animal Path’s summons, and buries the Human path with a wave of one hand. The Deva Path darts in, just this side of too fast to see, and Gaara is forced to meet him hand-to-hand even though he knows the dangers of it. Half a moment later, though, there's an explosion edged with glittering silver, and Gaara leaps away from him to land in front of Kakashi and the masked ANBU, calling up a cocoon of sand to save their eyes as Fū blinds all six Paths with her Scale Powder Bomb.

Kakashi doesn’t pause to thank him, but is already moving even as the sand falls away, a lightning technique forming around his hand. Tenzo flanks him as he lunges for the Naraka Path, the ANBU aiming for the Animal Path as sharp-tipped roots explode from the ground. Fū swoops in above them, Chōmei’s chakra gathering around her, and Gaara spares her half a glance—mostly unharmed, chakra reserves still holding out well enough—before he turns his attention to the Preta Path and swallows him in a coffin of sand.

Gaara doesn’t like fighting like this. His usual tactic of planting his feet and simply manipulating his sand won’t work here, and is far closer to ritual suicide than any sort of smart strategy. Now he has to duck and dodge and weave to stay out of the way of the Deva Path’s gravity, which is something even his Armor of Sand can't withstand. Gritting his teeth, he shoves at Shukaku in his head, and the pissy tanuki snarls in return, but reluctantly increases his chakra until Gaara can spread it all the way across their battlefield.

“Fū!” he calls, and half a second later another flare of light blinds the Paths. In the same instant, Gaara clenches a fist, and wraps all six paths in a thick, bijuu-augmented coffin of sand. He has no illusions about how long it will hold them, but at this point, any chance to plan an actual, functional strategy is more than welcome. He isn’t Naruto, who can throw himself into a knot of enemies with no plan whatsoever, trick them ten times in a row, and emerge victorious. Gaara likes to plan, and while he can definitely do it on the fly, against opponents like these he can't risk anything resembling a flaw.

“You think to hold us like this?” the Deva Path asks, voice only just barely audible from within the meter-thick sand. “This is base foolishness, Ichibi jinchuuriki. Your sand is nothing more than a child’s toy against me.”
Shukaku huffs in offense at that, and Gaara will never admit it, but he feels similarly. Narrowing his eyes at the six human-sized mounds, he adds another few feet of thickness to their coffins, reinforces the Asura Path’s again just for good measure, and then heads for where Kakashi and Tenzo are falling back.

Fū drops down to join them, folding her wings along the line of her spine as she lands. Her expression is far from happy, but Gaara is relieved to see that she doesn’t bear more than superficial wounds, despite having focused on the Animal Path and its summons. She meets his eyes as he studies her, and her smile is quick and brief, but warm with reassurance, and a heartbeat later she plants her hands on her hips and says, “So, Commander? Plan? As much as I love head-on confrontations, this isn’t working.”

Gaara closes his eyes, keeping half of his attention on the contained Paths but letting the rest drift. “The danger is in their teamwork,” he murmurs, to himself more than his companions. “As extensions of the same will, they can operate flawlessly together, while we are only human.”

“They have a shared line of sight, don’t they?” That’s Kakashi, sounding thoughtful. “What should be blind spots aren’t blind spots at all.”

Fū makes a disgusted noise. “The Rinnegan,” she confirms. “Nagato divided his powers into six bodies that he controls from a distance. They might as well be one person with a Hyuuga’s rang of vision.”

At that moment, three of the six coffins explode outward, and Tenzo lunges past Gaara's nose in a blur of steel and reaching branches. Kakashi follows him, an earth technique swallowing the Asura Path as he kicks the Animal Path into the path of Tenzo’s next jutsu. Gaara sends his sand with them to make the footing treacherous for the enemy, but when Fū moves to launch herself into the air again, he catches her by the arm.

From a distance, he thinks, like an epiphany.

“Dojutsus generally require line of sight,” he says, “or at least proximity.”

Because they’ve been working together for six years now, in everything from rebuilding houses to commanding a village to training their genin teams, Fū gets what he’s saying without any more need for clarification. She grins, bright and fierce, and nods. “Those two will need to hold them off,” she says. “You can make the seal?”

Gaara nods, already reaching out with his sand to carve the lines of the seal into the earth around the battlefield. “You have the chakra?” he counters, and she rolls her eyes and doesn’t bother to answer, flinging herself up into the air.

“White Rock?” she calls back, even as she flips over to kick the Human Path away from where it’s coming up behind Tenzo.

That should be sufficiently far away, Gaara judges, ducking away as the Deva path closes in on him. He catches a blow before it can reach his head, and then ducks down and forward to throw the first Path over his shoulder. The Deva Path lands on his feet, but that half a second of delay is enough for Gaara to call up more of his sand and bury the reanimated corpse in a wave of it. The edges catch the Naraka Path, pulling him along, and Gaara heads for where Kakashi is hemmed in by a giant ox, a vast centipede, and a huge dog with multiple heads. He sweeps Naruto's former teacher out of the way just as the dog lunges, letting it crash into the ox, and his sand carries them to the far side of the battlefield.
“I don’t suppose you have any summons?” Gaara asks without much hope, blocking a blow from the Preta Path with a wall that holds it back and then surges forward to trap it.

“Does a cute, mouthy little pug count?” Kakashi asks dryly, knocking one of the Asura Path’s blades away with a kunai and then following up with a surge of flames.

Gaara doesn’t bother to answer that, but spares half a moment to wish that Orochimaru would conveniently show up right about now. Manda might be aggressive, violent, and rude, but he’s plenty big enough to eat these summons and would likely be more than happy to do so.

The Deva Path strikes at him again, too fast for a human, but at that moment the last line of the seal connects, and Gaara smiles. Just faintly, but it’s enough to make the Path’s eyes narrow as it pulls up short. “You—” it begins.

But Gaara doesn’t give him time to finish. “Fū!” he calls, and she laughs, flipping over in midair and folding her wings, dropping into a crouch on the edge of the open space. The Preta and Animal Paths lunge for her, hands reaching, but she doesn’t move and Tenzo blocks them with a wall of wood. Fū swipes at one of the bleeding cuts on her arm, covering her hand with blood, and slams her palm down on the outermost of the deep lines Gaara's sand carved into the ground. The hum of her chakra fills the air, the sound of beetle wings on a warm summer night, and light races over the seal like caged lightning.

Gaara feels the world shift and slide away, and it feels like victory.

There’s a tight, tense pounding behind Sakura’s eyes, the beginnings of what will be a truly spectacular migraine if she pays attention to it, so she shuts it away, focuses on the barely controlled chaos in front of her instead. “Kaga, Fujimoto, take your squads to the western edge of the battlefield. Akagi, Tachibana, the south. Find a chuunin to guard you—"

“We’ll go.”

The soft voice makes her start and turn, glancing down to see twelve children with Uzushio hitai-ate standing in the hastily-erected medical center. A pair of redheads are in the front, watching her with resolve like iron in their violet eyes, but the one who spoke is a smaller boy, blond and amber-eyed, who’s standing just to their left.

“Sorry?” she asks after a beat, glancing from the blond boy to the others behind him. There isn’t a single one over fourteen, and she’s willing to bet they’re still genin. But three genin together and on the verge of their Chuunin Exam is well equal to most chuunin, and hopefully these twelve are the same, if they’re volunteering for what she thinks.

And, as though in response to the thought, the redheaded girl in the front raises her chin, as if it’s a challenge. “Uzukage-sama sent us,” she says. “We can accompany your medic teams instead of a chuunin.”

Sakura is a shinobi. She’s been one, or been in training to be one, for the vast majority of her life, and so she doesn’t hesitate. “All right,” she answers, shoving herself back into a commander’s mindset by sheer force of will. “Fighting is heaviest on the western edge, so the most proficient in combat will be needed there. The southern quadrant is the furthest from here, so prioritize speed. You know your own capabilities, so I’ll leave that to you.”

The girl nods sharply and turns to survey her fellow genin for a long heartbeat. Then she takes a
breath and orders, “Team Fū, you’ll be with us. Team Koto, Team Gin, you're fastest here, so south. Ready?”

There’s a low murmur of agreement, and the teams look back at Sakura expectantly. No grandstanding, no arguing, no petty displays of one-upmanship or battles of will regarding the girl’s command. Sakura feels a faint pang for her own genin classmates, who likely wouldn’t have accepted such orders without at least a token fight.

“Right,” she says after a second, and gestures to where Fujimoto and Kaga are waiting impatiently. “Fighters, those are your squads. Move out, we’ve got lives to save.”

The two redheads and the blond boy follow Kaga as she darts away, falling in around the three medics without pause. The other team, two girls and another redheaded boy, follow Fujimoto’s squad as the others break for the south, and Sakura closes her eyes with a brief, undirected prayer that they’ll all come back.

Then they get another flood of wounded shinobi, and she doesn’t have any more time to think.

Utakata is cursing quietly under his breath, nursing a ragged burn that stretches from his shoulder all the way to his fingertips. Saiken is already healing it, and he can feel the soothing wash of chakra sliding beneath the blackened skin, but it’s not quite fast enough. Konan is ruthless and relentless, fully deserving of her S-rank status, and her paper attacks aren’t even slightly susceptible to water, which is Utakata's affinity.

He’s getting beaten by paper. Utakata is greatly offended by this.

Konan releases a flight of paper shuriken, but light flashes off something hair-thin and metallic as Koto darts in front of him. Wires follow the arc of her fingertips, and a small touch of chakra brings them to life with a bone-shaking hum of sound. The noise rises, sharpens as the projectiles near, and just before they strike it hits its peak. The paper shreds as if ripped by an invisible hand, and Koto lunges forward, her wires lashing out at Konan directly. A surge of paper sheets blocks them, knocking them off course, and before Koto can recover Konan sends her origami weapons shooting after her. The grey-haired woman swears and throws herself out of the way, but the papers follow, and she abandons her wires in favor of a whirling vortex of water that hurls the kunai to one side.

As the feeling returns to his fingertips, Utakata flexes his hand and lifts his head to fix his stare on Konan. The woman stares back, expressionless and seemingly perfectly calm, and Utakata has to bite his tongue to keep from cursing again. He doesn’t envy the others facing Pein and Madara, but he doesn’t particularly care for this match, either.

“I don’t suppose you would consider surrendering?” he asks, because he might as well, and because Naruto is infectious in the same way as a particularly contagious disease. Konan doesn’t react either way, though, and he sighs softly, giving up on that line of thought. He doesn’t have Naruto’s skill with words, won’t be able to convince her even if he wanted to take the time to try. Overwhelming her will have to suffice.

‘Saiken?’ he asks silently, and the bijuu answers eagerly, its power rising in a wave. Utakata closes his eyes and lets the transformation take him as he surrenders control to the Rokubi.

Saiken doesn’t shut him out, doesn’t attempt to run rampant with the freedom, and Utakata is once more grateful to Killer B and his training. The Six-Tails has always been reasonable, seemingly far more so than the other bijuu besides Gyuki, but to have him as a full, ever-reliable partner is more
than he had ever imagined before meeting the Raikage’s brother.

Konan realizes what’s happening just half a heartbeat too late. A cloud of exploding tags fly across the field, but Saiken breathes out a fog of gaseous acid that dissolves them on contact. Eyes narrowing, the blue-haired woman leaps back, hands coming up to form signs, but Saiken doesn’t wait for her to finish. A wave of sticky slime swamps her, and Konan cries out, seemingly despite herself, as the goo sticks her in place, binding her papers before they can fly.

With a crow of victory, Saiken asks, ‘That all you wanted, Bubbles?’

Utakata chuckles softly, letting Saiken fade back into his mindscape again. ‘Thank you,’ he responds, letting the cheerful, energetic bijuu feel his fondness. He could argue the nickname—and often does—but for now…he’ll let it go. ‘Naruto was right to pick us to face her. I forgot I shouldn’t doubt him.’

‘Don’t tell Kurama that,’ Saiken mutters somewhat waspishly. ‘I get enough grief from him as it is, what with Naru-chan being Uzukage.’

The power settles, falling back into a pale blue cloak rather than an overwhelming shroud in the shape of the slug, and Utakata surveys the Akatsuki member. She’s still struggling, tense and furious, and Utakata draws his pipe and a tiny bottle of solution with a sigh, knowing she won’t give up until she’s either exhausted herself or gotten free, and he’s not willing to risk the latter. A cloud of bubbles surround him, and he sends them outward with a touch of chakra. They burst in puffs of pale herbal smoke, and Konan slumps unconscious the moment she breathes it in. The remaining bubbles sweep out, striking several nearby White Zetsu and rendering them senseless as well.

“I sense my cute little cousin’s hand in that,” Koto says from off to the side, wrapping a cut on her thigh. Utakata studies her with narrowed eyes, and she waves him off with a huff. “Oh, stop fretting. I'm hardly made of glass.”

Personally, no matter how fond of Kabuto he may be, Utakata wouldn’t even dream of calling him cute, but he supposes that as the Ookami matriarch Koto is allowed. It’s still rather horrifying, though. He resolutely puts it out of mind, recorking the bottle of bubble solution and tucking it back into his robes. “Kabuto designed it, yes,” he agrees, withdrawing his regular solution. “It’s fairly unwieldy for anything but surprise attacks, as it’s slower than the rest of my jutsus, but still useful.”

Koto chuckles at that, rising to her feet and uncoiling her wires again. The fighting is thick around them, already moving into the space that was originally clear for their battle, and she almost casually flicks a hand, wrapping the wires around a pair of White Zetsu ganging up on a dark-haired chuunin. A throbbing hum of power and the high, sweet sound rips them apart, and she moves on to the next cluster with a wicked grin.

She’s definitely related to Kabuto, Utakata thinks with a sigh. He raises his pipe to his lips and breathes out a stream of ink-filled bubbles, then lets them fly.

For all that she hasn’t actually fought since facing Orochimaru seven years ago, Tsunade hasn’t let herself get rusty. She’s a Kage, her village’s last line of defense, the one to join the battle when everything looks hopeless. If she’s not in top form, that kind of duty might as well be a death sentence, so she’s kept up her training even as she’s prayed she’ll never need to use it.

She’s using it now, though, and without hesitation. Because these green freaks are closing in on her village, on her people, and she’s not the type to let that stand. As with Danzo, she’s following her
own beliefs, leading the charge when she should technically hold back and let her shinobi fight for her.

Then again, she’s not the only one, Tsunade thinks wryly, ducking as a knot of White Zetsu go flying over her head, hurled by the powerful blow of a huge battle fan. Mei is off to the left, molten rock surging like a tide around her. The other Kage are in the very heart of the fray, and they don’t look to be leaving any time soon.

A hard punch slams the clone in front of Tsunade into the ground, leaving it unmoving, and she forges ahead, laying around her the way she hasn’t since the end of the Second War. A clone slams into her bodily, knocking her off balance, and she curses sharply as she tumbles to the ground.

Fighting masses of enemies is both easier and harder than fighting a single opponent, and she’s out of practice in this at least after so many years. Back in the War, she had—

“Heya, hime!”

Jiraiya plows into a group of clones, laying them out with several blindingly quick blows, even as a surge of chakra—familiar and dear, untouched by the abrasive, almost mad edge it had the last time she felt it—rises on her other side. Orochimaru hisses out a jutsu, hands dancing through the signs, and blades of wind tear across the battlefield, carving deep furrows in the ground and bloody gashes into enemy flesh.

“Tsunade,” he acknowledges, glancing at her out of the corner of his eye the way he always used to do when he was nervous or uncertain of his welcome, and Tsunade has to choke back a sob of relief to see them both here, alive and unharmed. The lack of word the last few days alarmed her more than she cares to admit.

“Jiraiya, Orochimaru,” she breathes, and reaches out automatically. Jiraiya falls back from his downed opponents, catching her hand with a bright, cheerful grin and squeezing gently. Orochimaru hesitates, watching her carefully, but he too offers a hand, and when she takes it some of the lines around his eyes ease faintly. He makes no further gestures, but together they pull her to her feet.

Once she’s standing he meets her eyes squarely. “Tsunade,” he says softly. “I am…sorry.”

Tsunade’s breath catches in her throat, because she knows Orochimaru, knows him inside and out and in all the ways he hides himself, with words or otherwise. Knows that he never apologizes unless he actually means it, unless his deeply buried heart won’t let him do otherwise. Equally she knows that it isn’t a simple thing, those words said here and now, familiar scars present beneath her fingers even though they should have been lost with his original body. The apology is for everything, all the way back to the beginning, from pulling away from them to the experiments to Sarutobi to their encounter seven years ago, and Tsunade…

She hadn’t realized just how much she wanted to hear it until he spoke.

Tightening her grip on his hand, she releases Jiraiya and pulls her lost teammate close, wraps her arms around his thin shoulders and hugs him tightly. He stiffens in her hold, tense and still like a wary snake, but after a long moment he reaches up and gently pats her shoulder. It’s an awkward motion, unpracticed and stiff, but it makes her laugh a little anyways, because that’s to be entirely expected. He’s always been that way.

“You bastards,” she says thickly, letting him go and taking a step back to wipe at her eyes. Too many reunions in the last hour, too much stress. She’s not normally this emotional. “You two had better have a good excuse for making me worry so much.”
Jiraiya laughs, and there's real joy in it, because she’s said the same thing so very many times before, in their genin days, after missions, in the war. He slings an arm over each of their shoulders, tugging them into crushing half-hugs, and then lets them go to crack his knuckles. “Hey, hime, we’ve got a bet going,” he tells her cheerfully. “You want in?”

Tsunade glances between them, standing so tall and solid in front of her, and can't help the surge of warmth that fills her chest. Nothing is perfect. There are still old grievances, still old grief, crimes and distance and three decades of separation, but…

But for now, this is enough.

“Usual odds?” she asks, wiping her eyes one last time and then shaking the tension out her fingers.

“Of course,” Orochimaru answers, arching an amused brow at her. “You really think we’d play for other stakes at this point, Tsunade?”

Huffing out a determined breath, Tsunade plants her hands on her hips and turns to survey the army before them. “Prepare to lose, boys,” she tells them, and doesn’t fight her smile.

It falls away, however, when a familiar figure in red armor plunges past her, laughing merrily as he goes, and a giant dragon of wood erupts around him.

Tsunade blinks after her grandfather’s retreating figure as it’s all but buried by White Zetsu clones. She glances towards Orochimaru, who is always at fault where weird happenings are concerned, and is promptly struck speechless by the man stalking past him.

“Witless, idiotic clown,” Senju Tobirama mutters, before following his brother.

“Surprise?” Jiraiya offers weakly, and Tsunade growls.
Fourth Movement: Deceptive Cadence (Dissonant Duet)

Chapter Notes

Before I give my usual rash of excuses, I would just like to say that I so very much appreciate that you guys aren’t up in arms about the missed updates. I’m very grateful for your allowances and the lack of nastiness when I don’t meet my deadlines, so from the bottom of my heart, thank you all. You are solid gold, for serious. :) That said, between travel, family, the holiday, more family, the return trip, work, and my immune system finally giving up the ghost, there was little time to write, and less to double-check myself. And English is difficult, whine whine whine. Advance apologies for any errors you might stumble over.

(This chapter features a scene closely inspired by one in the manga, though it’s definitely not verbatim. Just—credit to Kishi and his particular brand of crack, etc. Also, writing this has reminded just how much I freaking ADORE evil!Obito. He’s such an amazing asshole. *hearts*)

[Deceptive cadence: A chord progression that seems to lead to resolving itself on the final chord, but does not.

Dissonant: Harsh, discordant, characterized by a lack of harmony; also a chord that sounds incomplete until it resolves itself on a harmonious chord.]

“Why?” Obito demands, sharp and harsh, like thunder in the winded silence their pause has brought. The land around them is scarred, trees twisted and malformed from mokuton and misdirected jutsus alike. Obito himself is nearly untouched, thanks to his healing rate, but his clothes are ripped and torn and soaked where he couldn’t quite avoid Naruto’s blows fast enough, and his mask has cracked almost in half. As Naruto braces himself against a chunk of stone that once belonged to Konoha’s wall, trying to get his wind back, the Uchiha—Kagami’s son, and Naruto doesn’t know whether that fact should leave him overjoyed or aching—takes a threatening step forward, chakra rising and crackling around him like the fire he seems so fond of.

“Why what?” Naruto returns, planting Sāji’s butt in the earth and smoothing his thumb over the largest seal on the haft. It pulses weakly, the energy wavering and unsteady—it’s eating the chakra from Obito’s jutsus the way it’s supposed to, but the seal’s activation is dependent on Naruto returning the attacks, and he’s never been skilled with Katon jutsus. And in addition to that, there’s little hope of landing a blow to transfer the target seal, so for now, all he can do is let the power build up and hope it doesn’t blow up in his face. Literally.

Obito growls, rough and furious, and Kamui’s warping vortex opens just long enough to send a hail of exceptionally fast, deadly shuriken whipping out of the other dimension. With a soft curse, Naruto uses Sāji’s bracing to kick off the ground, leaping upward and propelling himself high enough to dodge the cloud of weapons. He has to admit that Obito is exceptionally skilled with Kamui, even augmenting his strength with mokuton. Kagami never thought of half these uses for it, and he had the advantage of family records and knowledge of the ancestor who previously activated it.

“Why are you fighting?” Obito snarls, and even as Naruto drops back to the ground he’s blurring
forward, branches bursting from the ground like fingers set to impale. “Don’t you want to live in a world where all your dreams can come true? Don’t you want to live without suffering, without pain? You could be happy!”

Naruto laughs at that, bringing the naginata’s blade around to slice neatly through the reaching branches and then leaping nimbly over the knot of roots that rises to grab him. Kurama bristles and roars inside his head, his chakra adding an extra edge of speed to let him keep up with Obito as the Uchiha trades mokuton for the battle fan strapped to his back.

“A perfect dream world?” Naruto scoffs, Sōji slashing forward only to be met and blocked by the gunbai. “Why the hell would I want something like that? The dreams and goals I have right now are what make all the pain worthwhile! They’re what make me keep walking, what let me move forward! And it’s the pain that makes them real! If we didn’t have to work for our dreams, they’d be completely worthless!”

He leaps back, out of range of the gunbai as Obito brings it arcing around like a flail, and forms the hand seals for a familiar jutsu, calling it up one-handed as Sōji fends off another clutch of grasping branches. The Rasengan whirls from his fingertips, its imbued wind chakra tearing over the already battle-scarred earth, but Obito brings the war fan up like a shield, bracing himself behind it, and the Rasengan bursts against it, leaving deep furrows on either side of him but doing little else.

Obito laughs then, dry as dust, low and sharp with more pain than Naruto has ever heard in anyone’s voice before, and it’s a shock, because Naruto has heard a similar laugh, only that one was wry and self-deprecating and angry at one clan, rather than the entire world. Kagami sounded similar on his wedding day, so full of loathing with a good portion of it self-directed.

“Worthless?” he asks, and that low voice is even rougher than before. “Look at your own life, Uzumaki Naruto! Look at those you call your friends! You're sacrifices. You were innocent children, and your villages took you and made you into monsters for the sake of their dreams. Think of all you’ve suffered since, their blind loathing and their exclusion of a child who never harmed them. Tell me, is that kind of pain worth it? Wouldn’t everything be better if no more children ever had to go through something like that? What if it was your child? Would you still be so dismissive of a world without pain and hatred and fear?”

He does think about it, because he always does. He thinks about Gaara, so solemn and wise. Fū, so bright and cheerful. Utakata, so kind and serene. Roushi, so unwaveringly loyal and infinitely stubborn. Killer B, so infectiously jubilant and at peace with himself. Yugito, so proud and fierce. They’ve all been hurt somehow, they’ve all been turned out or cast away at some point in their lives, but Naruto honestly can’t say that he thinks any of them would choose to remake themselves, if given the chance. They’ve all found a home, with each other even if it’s not solely in Uzushio, and they’re all better for it, Naruto included.

Being a jinchuuriki is a burden, but…it’s also an honor. They were chosen to be their villages’ strength, the balances of power in a world where might is everything, and that hasn’t changed just because they’ve all picked another path than the one of suffering they were supposed to walk.

“The pain makes us appreciate what we have,” he counters, planting his feet stubbornly and meeting the Sharingan eyes nearly concealed behind that mask. “It means that we love our comrades all the more, our friends all the more. And it means we’ll fight to the death for them if we have to, to keep what we’ve earned with our pain. So you can keep your perfect fantasy world, Obito. We’ll all fight to keep this one, because it’s ours.”

‘Hey, Kurama,’ he calls silently, letting Sōji drop until the tip of the shining blade rests against the ground. ‘What do you say we indulge in a bit of overkill?’
The fox laughs, wicked and eager, understanding the reference immediately. ‘Oh, brat, I thought you’d never ask.’

Naruto chuckles, and four quick sweeps of the blade leave the outline of a seal in the earth. Another three fill in the interior, and Naruto ducks away from a hail of kunai as Obito interrupts, attempting to stop him, but it’s already too late. The blood on Sāji’s blade from the few swipes that managed to connect is more than enough, and as the last line connects the very air shivers.

Deep in the woods, hidden behind seven seals that whisper don't look, don't pause, there's nothing to see to anyone close enough, a much larger seal begins to shine.

In the sky, stretched above all of Konoha and the majority of the surrounding valley, there are clouds that have been gathering for an entire week now, collecting moisture and raising the humidity to almost unbearable levels. They’re heavy and bloated, but not only with rain. Wound through them, part of their very makeup, is nature chakra, so subtle and randomly scattered that even a Hyuuga would dismiss it as a natural occurrence, if they noticed it at all.

When the seal is triggered, the clouds finally do as they haven’t been allowed this past week, and it’s like the sky itself breaks open, all of that stored water thundering down on their heads in the form of a heavy, drenching downpour.

Uzushio's fall taught Naruto that stacking his deck can only ever help, and he’s taken that lesson very much to heart. He’s good at Fuuton jutsus, but unless he’s around large bodies of water, his Suiton is forced to take fairly distant second. In Uzushio, with the ocean on all sides and beneath the city itself, this is usually no problem, but Konoha is a desert in comparison.

Unless there's a rainstorm to even the odds.

Naruto laughs, even as he whirls away from a spiral of fire that fills the air with steam. Sāji flashes in the half-light, spinning through his fingers in the movement that Danzo first recognized, but now, with so much water in the air and already beginning to pool on the ground, it’s hardly the grandstanding, showy move it first appears. This time, the water follows, whipping itself into a furious vortex that surges forward like a gaping mouth, and Naruto lets it go. A part of him believes he should feel hesitant, bringing his full strength to bear against his best friend’s long-lost son, but the rest of him drowns it out. He defeated Haku, the first time they met, and Gaara too, and now both of them are his closest friends. With any luck, Obito will be the same.

Kamui whirls Obito out of the way before the surge of water can reach him, but this is Naruto's battlefield now, his advantage, and he closes his eyes, letting the chakra split into each raindrop be his guide. The faintest hint of movement where there should be none and he spins, wind blades flying, a low and fast-moving wave just behind them. There's a curse, another surge of chakra, and Obito phases right through both jutsus, gunbai already flying as he becomes tangible again. Naruto ducks to the side, his naginata’s steel-capped butt slamming into the broad side of the weapon and throwing it off target.

Obito is there to catch the fan as it rebounds, though, and he twists with the momentum of it, letting it pull him around to face Naruto once more. He catches Sāji’s blade against the metal reinforcements on his glove, knocks it aside and lunges in, the looped chain swinging like a weapon. In a split-second decision, Naruto relinquishes his grip on the naginata in favor of having both hands free for seals, and his fingers fly through the next set even as he ducks under the chain and very purposefully doesn’t step back, even with Obito dangerously close to him. The chain swings again, but Naruto raises an arm to block it, only sparing a brief wince as the heavy links connect with the crack of breaking bone. His free hand lashes out, and Obito is too close to dodge, can't go intangible without releasing Naruto, so the Azure Dragon Palm hits him squarely in the chest. The spiraling torrent of
water knocks him completely off his feet as it throws him back, and he smashes into a portion of the wall that’s still standing, striking the stone with enough force to make him cry out.

Naruto staggers back, clutching his arm to his chest even as the bone snaps back into place, Kurama’s fiery red chakra mending the break and the torn skin before he can so much as ask. A low, echoing snarl pulls his attention back to his opponent, just in time to see Obito pull himself out of the fractured wall. As he takes a step forward, the already cracked mask shatters the rest of the way, pieces of white porcelain tumbling down around his feet, and Naruto gets his first clear look at his friend’s son.

He doesn’t look like Kagami. That jaw is too narrow, the features a little more elegant, more refined. Azami’s blood, most likely—Naruto, as Arashi, often teased Kagami that he looked more like some street fighter, all squared off and stubborn, rather than a noble and polished Uchiha. And Obito’s hair is too thick, too flyaway, to be Kagami’s, which was dead-straight and never deigned to curl. Those brows are too fine, and the mouth too full. It’s clear that Obito takes after his mother, rather than his father.

But the eyes, slanted and dark and intent—those are Kagami’s eyes, even beyond the Mangekyo they bear.

Slowly, deliberately, Obito wipes the water off his face and brushes his sodden bangs to the side. His gaze never wavers from Naruto’s, though. “You’re the Uzukage,” he says flatly. “You are the strength of your village, the one they entrust with all of their hopes and dreams. But tell me, Naruto, what will happen if you let them down? What will happen if you fail them?”

Naruto closes his eyes, fighting back the memory of blood pooling in the streets, the bodies of his people piled behind walls and against buildings. Of a red tide, a shattered fleet, a war that couldn’t be halted or won no matter how hard or long he fought.

The rain batters him, and it feels cold, frozen compared to the warmth of mere moments ago, because really, if that wasn’t a failure, what would be?

Obito takes his silence to mean that the blow struck true, and Naruto can’t even say he’s wrong. It was well-aimed, if nothing else. “Do you see now what I mean? If you fail, those who claim to love you now will turn their backs on you, and make everything utterly meaningless. It’s empty. This world, words like ‘hope’ and ‘entrust’ and ‘have faith’—they’re all empty. They mean nothing at all, no matter how you try to justify them by saying you’ve earned them through your pain.”

Just this once, Naruto can’t reply, the words frozen in his throat. He doesn’t look away, but it’s a near thing.

For his part, Obito seems to take no pleasure in scoring a verbal hit. His eyes are dark, his expression grim, and though his gaze doesn’t waver, there’s nothing even close to victory in it. Just a bitter sort of resignation, with an edge of deeply seated anger at the world at large.

Then, from within Naruto’s mind, Kurama rumbles, ‘Hey, brat. Move over. Give me a minute with him.’

Surprised but hardly wary after so many years as symbiotic partners, Naruto slides away, lets the fox take control of his body. Kurama shakes himself as he rises to the surface, adjusting to being momentarily bipedal, and growls in a voice that is several measures deeper than Naruto’s own, “Hey. You honestly think that way?”

There’s a brief hesitation as Obito’s eyes narrow, his chakra flaring. “The Kyuubi, I presume,” he
Kurama snorts, crossing his arms and lifting his chin. “But you're forgetting something,” he taunts, the mocking edge to his voice clear. “You're overlooking the fact that it’s human nature to make the best of a bad situation. Look at the brat. He grew up an orphan, hated, the class’s dead last, a loser at everything—”

‘Hey!’ Naruto protests. ‘That was combination of the teachers’ prejudice and me underestimating my own strength, thank you!’

“—even if he was a genius somewhere deep, deep down,” Kurama tacks on smoothly, though Naruto very much does not appreciate the sarcasm at the end there. “The first time around, his village was destroyed and he had to watch. But the people still came back. They put themselves in his hands, knowing who he was, because they had hope, and faith, and all those other things you're mocking right now. And we’ve only ever met a chakra impression of the brat’s father, but he was willing to do the same, and seal me into Naruto believing that it would make the world a better place. And the brat did make it better. No matter what happened afterwards, in the end, Naruto lived up to their expectations. He’s done everything in his power to make everyone’s dreams possible, and everyone knows it. So keep your skepticism to yourself!”

Kurama subsides with a last, offended, embarrassed huff, and Naruto comes back to himself laughing, warm all the way through. “Thanks, Kurama,” he says lightly, but he knows that the fox will hear the sincerity buried underneath. ‘You're a big softy, did anyone ever tell you that?’

‘No one who lived to see the next day,’ Kurama growls threateningly, but it’s clearly all for show. ‘Now stop jawing and kick his ass, brat!’

Naruto grins and scoops up Sāji from where she’s lying off to the side. He twirls her through his fingers as he rises, and a wave of water follows the motion.

“I'll beat it into you if I have to, bastard,” he threatens with a sharp grin. “This world’s worth fighting for, and so is everyone in it!”

Obito’s eyes narrow to dangerous slits, and as Naruto throws himself forward, wind and water leading, Obito lunges to meet him, fire turning the rain to hissing vapor as he goes.

The heavens open when they're halfway to the walls, drenching them within seconds, and Minato can't quite hold back an aggrieved sigh as the formerly dry streets turn to veritable rivers beneath their sandals. He splashes through a particularly deep puddle, then leaps for the rooftop, Sarutobi on his left and the unknown Uchiha on his right.

“Spectacular Konoha weather,” he huffs, squinting to see through the rain. They're looking for stragglers, even as they make their cautious way east, where two opponents who are Kage-level at the very least are locked in combat. Minato can feel the Kyuubi’s chakra flaring even from here, corrosive and angry, and worry bubbles like acid in his gut. If the Kyuubi has gotten free, if the seal is broken—

“Well, this time it had some help,” the Uchiha says with poorly buried amusement, and Minato glances over at him, blinking in surprise. The man catches his look and flashes him a grin that definitely isn’t Uchiha standard—gods know Fugaku would have looked a damn sight less constipated if he’d allowed even half that emotion through his mask. “It’s Arashi. He’s called the Storm God for a reason, you know. This is one of his signature moves. Once he lays down the seal,
he can call up a storm in an hour or two. And from the looks of the one…” He grimaces slightly as he hops a rain gutter that’s already close to overflowing. “It’s been brewing a whole hell of a lot longer than that.”

Minato is familiar with the title, but little beyond it. Almost nothing beyond what Jiraiya told him when he’d passed on the bells for the team test, and the brief mention Kushina once made of the Sandaime Uzukage when she was showing him some of Uzushio’s seals. “He was an Uzumaki, wasn’t he?” he asks, trying to picture the sort of man who could earn such a name so young. Redheaded, likely, given his clan. Probably tall and imposing and—

“He was,” Sarutobi confirms, his eyes constantly flickering back to the walls even as they scan the streets for more of the clones. But he spares a moment to glance at Minato, a faint, wry smile pulling at his lips. “He looked very much like you, actually, Minato. A little shorter, a little thinner, but…the shape of your faces is almost the same.”

The Uchiha hums softly in agreement, then blurs through a set of hand seals and blows out a very large fireball, roasting a clone that just turned onto the main street. He grimaces as he turns away, muttering, “Damn it, Arashi, you never did have any consideration for people with fire affinities.”

Minato wants to ask something more, anything—*was that one of the reasons you picked me over Orochimaru, because I look like the Storm God?* he thinks, but doesn’t say, because he is actually aware of his own worth—but before he can, Sarutobi glances around them and says with well-hidden impatience, “This is enough, I think. We can be of more use over there.”

“*Finally,*” the Uchiha—Minato thinks he heard Sarutobi call him Kagami—huffs, already picking up speed over the slippery rooftops. The Sandaime matches him, and Minato keeps to his other side, eyes scanning the village as they run. It looks quite a bit different than the last time he saw it, heading out to meet the Kyuubi, but some things are still the same. And—

This is where Naruto grew up. This is where Naruto lives, where he probably became a shinobi. His *son. Kushina’s son.*

“Naruto,” he says to Sarutobi as they leap a side street and make their way over a grocery store. He would like to think that his voice doesn’t come out desperate, but…that’s probably a vain hope. “He—how is he? Or was he, last time you saw him?” It probably isn’t polite to bring up the fact that Sarutobi too is dead, but Minato honestly doesn’t really care at this point. His *son* is somewhere nearby, somehow in the middle of this if Orochimaru’s words are anything to go by. Minato physically *can’t* keep from asking.

Sarutobi glances at him, offering a faint smile like he knows what Minato is thinking. “Very well,” he says warmly. “He’s a prankster, but a genius too. Kakashi was his jounin instructor, and the last time I saw him, he went to face down the Ichibi in the middle of the Chuunin Exams. He is…very much like his mother, and like you.”

In front of them, something explodes in a burst of sharp-edged wind and a surge of water, and Kagami redoubles his pace, quickly outstripping the two Hokage. Minato debates grabbing one of his Hiraishin kunai, but they’re almost at the wall regardless, and this is one situation he doesn’t want to drop into unprepared. If that really is the Kyuubi possessing Naruto…he’s not entirely sure what else he can do, but he will try absolutely *anything.*

Then, with a whirl of water and the bright chime of bells, there’s a figure on the wall beside them, a long naginata spinning through deft fingers. Minato gets a brief impression of long blond hair, blue cloth, and sea-blue eyes before someone else appears. This one—
This one is heart-wrenchingly familiar, and, if the widening of those Sharingan eyes is anything to go by, just as surprised to see Minato as Minato is to see him.

But that face, that hair, they're both unmistakable, even so much older than when Minato last saw this boy, headed towards Kannabi Bridge. He freezes, famous reflexes completely useless in the face of this ghost, and can't even speak to ask how Obito is still alive.

It’s almost the death—again—of all three of them, because the blond dodges half a second before a hail of shuriken burst out of thin air, impossibly fast and spinning dangerously. Sarutobi is staring at the blond, and Kagami seems torn as to who he should stare at first, and Minato is (understandably) distracted by Obito, so none of them quite think to move out of the way in time.

It’s the blond man who saves them, leaping back in with his naginata leading, an arc of wind erupting like a shield at the last moment to turn the shuriken away, even as a trio of clones lunge for Obito and carry him back into the trees. Bells chime again, and this time Minato catches sight of the source of the sound—belled kanzashi, tucked haphazardly into the man’s soaked hair. But the chime seems…ever so slightly off, to Minato’s ears. He blinks, and listens a bit more closely as the man turns—

And then promptly loses that train of thought, and just about every other for good measure.

Because it’s Kushina’s face staring back at him, only with his own coloring. Blue eyes and blond hair, the same slanting eyes, but…those cheekbones, that bone structure, that jaw are all the same as he would see looking at his wife. Minato tries to take a breath, but feels it caught somewhere down in his lungs, because this is unmistakably, undeniably his son.

Blue eyes the same shade as his own go wide, flickering to the newly arrived group, and then catch and freeze on the very first figure in line. Naruto’s grip on the naginata falters slightly and he fumbles, lips parting and face paling, and Minato prepares to sweep forward and wrap his son in the first fatherly hug he’s received since he was a single night old.

But rather than leap at him, Naruto steps forward, letting the naginata fall to the stone, and whispers, “Kagami?”

“Arashi!” the Uchiha crows, delight and relief suffusing his features, and he lunges forward across the separating distance and latches on to Naruto, hugging him with what must be truly crushing force. But Naruto hugs him back the exact same way, laughing with disbelieving joy as they thump each other on the back and stagger a few steps in a loose approximation of a circle.

“Sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, Arashi,” Kagami is chanting, and somehow Minato doesn’t think the wetness on his cheeks is due only to the rain. “I failed. I failed you. I'm so sorry, they came out of nowhere and I couldn’t—gods, what happened? How are you still here, how do you still look like you're a teenager?”

Naruto—Arashi?—laughs, a choked sound that’s equal parts joy and grief. He pulls away slightly, even as a burst of water and wind erupts from the trees below them, like an explosion going off. He leans in, knocking his forehead against Kagami’s and closing his eyes. “Don’t say that,” he murmurs. “Don’t you dare, you stupid Uchiha, you tried, you gave everything you could and that’s all that matters. Uzushio is strong again, it’s fine, but you died and I didn’t even know. I should never have let you go alone, I'm the one who should be sorry.”

“Never,” Kagami tells him, thumping him lightly on the shoulder with one closed fist. “You aren’t the one who killed me, so you have nothing to be sorry for. It was—”
“Danzo.” Naruto spits the name out like it’s poison, and that’s—that’s definitely the Kyuubi’s chakra flaring around him. Minato is ridiculously confused right now. But at the sound of that name, Sarutobi goes stiff and tense next to him, just the barest flicker of killing intent leaking out into the air. “It was Danzo and his damned Root, he organized the whole thing, your attackers, the siege, the barrier falling, the Mizukage waiting until I was completely exhausted to find me—it was all him. But we got him, Kagami, we got him.”

Kagami laughs brokenly, leaning back slightly to press a quick kiss to Naruto's forehead before he ducks down again. “Of course you did, Arashi,” he huffs. “Like you'd ever do anything else, you crazy, stubborn bastard. You died, don’t try to lie to me. I know what you're not saying, so how the hell are you here?”

That gets a grin, crooked but full of foxy humor, stretching the whisker-marks on Naruto's cheeks. “Uzushio,” he says, as though that answers everything. “She wanted me to come back, so…she made me remember. And when I was reborn, it took a while for everything to click, but…it did.”

“That,” Sarutobi says severely, “is half of an explanation at best.” He takes a step forward, and there's something in his face that Minato has never seen before, too many emotions all mixed up and tangled together for anyone to read. He folds his arms across his chest, staring at the two men before him, and opens his mouth. Then he closes it again, and simply shakes his head, clearly at a loss for words.

Naruto just laughs. “Saru,” he offers cheerfully, stepping away from Kagami. “Or would you rather I just call you Jiji?”

“That’s the question, isn’t it?” Sarutobi returns dryly. “Naruto—Arashi—” He breaks off and rubs at his forehead. “You have always delighted in giving me migraines, no matter which lifetime we were in,” he mutters. “I should have guessed. I should have guessed the first time you mooched ramen off of me, honestly. Was that payback? And the pranks, for heaven’s sake.”

With a brilliant laugh, Naruto ducks forward to hug Sarutobi, too, warm and tight, and Sarutobi wraps his arms around him in return with an affectionate, infinitely tolerant smile.

And then Naruto is stepping away, and Minato is the last one in line. When two pairs of blue eyes meet, Minato finds that he can't quite breathe.

“Our son, he thinks, marveling the same way he did the first time he held the tiny baby he and Kushina had created. This is our son.

“Hello, Naruto,” he manages after an endless, breathless moment.

And Naruto grins back at him, no hint of reprimand or resentment. Only bright, effusive warmth and a depth of love that Minato isn’t entirely sure he deserves. “Hey, Dad,” he answers, and it’s quite possibly the best thing that Minato has heard in his entire lifetime.

His son.

Whatever questions he has, they don’t matter. Just this, here and now, is…

Amazing.
I'm afraid that I come (one week late, I am so sorry) bearing bad news. Last Monday, in protest of recent budget cuts, three of my coworkers quit. Honestly, I admire their resolve and can somewhat sympathize with their indignation, but now beyond just being underfunded my department is understaffed as well, and my line of work is not just something where you can jump into the middle of a colleague’s caseload and keep soldiering on. I haven’t had a day off since Christmas, and while I'm trying to wrangle some time, there’s not much hope for anything at the moment. So updates are going to be sporadic at best for the next couple of weeks. I apologize, but RL is going to have to take priority here. Argh. :/

“Anyone care to tell me why that man looks exactly like Azami?”

Kagami's pointed question is enough to break Naruto's silent contemplation, and he reluctantly drags his eyes away from his father, who is…

Naruto has never known his parents in either of the lives he’s lived. Arashi was an orphan, his mother and father both dead by the time he was a year old. He was told about them, knew shinobi who had known them, but they were never really his in any way that counted. And in this life, in Konoha, people say Namikaze Minato and everyone automatically looks to the mountain. There are few pictures of the Yondaime beyond that, and stone is good for likenesses, but captures almost nothing of the person.

Minato has blue eyes. The very same blue eyes that Naruto himself does, and it's…rather wondrous.

He’s met his parents’ chakra impressions before, of course—the failsafe in the seal didn’t exactly take Kurama’s equal partnership into account when it triggered—but they were just that: impressions. Brief moments of time caught and suspended indefinitely, and while the message they carried was welcome, was eagerly heard and readily accepted, Naruto has never quite been able to think of them as his actual parents. He knows how seals function, how such images can be left, and they are…shadows, moving photographs, rather than people.

But here and now, the man standing before him is most definitely his father in every way but having raised him. And perhaps that’s a very large part of what a father should be, but—

His father is here, alive, staring right back at him like Naruto is the one who’s a miracle, a wonder, and even if Naruto didn’t understand Minato's choices, even if he didn’t know what it is to be a Kage and make those decisions, he’d forgive a whole hell of a lot, just for that.

Kagami, ever impatient, clears his throat sharply and Naruto gives him a faintly sheepish smile, shifting to give his friend all of his attention. “I'm sorry?”

In the forest below them, another clone detonates like a captured storm exploding, and Naruto winces. One left, then, before Obito comes after him again.

The look Kagami gives him is several miles shy of impressed. “Arashi. That man. Why does he look
“exactly like Azami?”

Naruto restrains the urge to flinch. Because he knows Kagami, knows his loyalty and his faith and the way he clings to what family he’s made, rather than been born into, and this is going to hurt him. And really, Kagami has been hurt so very many times before. Naruto doesn’t want to be the one to do it yet again.

With a soft sigh, he plants Sāji’s metal-capped butt against the stone of the wall and leans on it. There’s no easy way to phrase this, so he grits his teeth for a brief moment before he gives in and says, “Because apparently when Uchiha and Senju genes mix, it’s the Senju that come out on top. So rather than looking like a street brawler, your kid ended up looking like the scion of a noble clan. Congratulations.”

After spending the majority of his life in Uzushio, Kagami is hardly Uchiha-pale anymore, but when the meaning of the words registers Naruto can see the blood drain from his face, the mix of horror and awe that overtakes his features. “I—Obito?!” he demands, taking a shaky step back. He drags a rough hand through his hair as his knees give out, sending him sinking to the stone with a ragged noise of pain. “He’s a part of Akatsuki?”

“How?” Minato demands, as the words finally make him tear his gaze from Naruto. “We all thought Obito died at— And you're his father? He’s half Senju?”

Apparently whoever brought them back—and honestly, Naruto has no doubt that it was Orochimaru, because this kind of thing is always his fault—filled them in on at least a little bit of what’s going on, but hardly everything. Naruto grimaces, but nods. “I think Madara must have gotten to him at some point after you thought he was killed,” he says, sorting the pieces out in his head as he speaks. “He’s been calling himself Madara for at least twelve years now, maybe even longer, and he’s the leader of Akatsuki. They’ve been trying to capture all the bijuu and activate Eternal Tsukiyomi.”

Sarutobi makes a sharp, angry, almost wounded noise in the back of his throat. “And how many have they taken so far?” he asks grimly, pulling off his helmet to rub at his forehead wearily.

That makes Naruto grin, though, and Kurama echoes the feeling with a low, smug laugh. “Only two—Isobu and Kokuō. B and Yugito are still in Kumo, and Roushi, Fū, Gaara, Utakata, and I have been living in Uzushio, where they couldn’t get to us.”

Both Sarutobi and Minato blink at that, and look some flavor of conflicted, but Kagami lets out a relieved breath that’s halfway to a laugh and shakes his head. “The city’s still standing, then?” he asks, meeting Naruto's eyes almost desperately as he struggles back to his feet. “That’s true? Kiri didn’t level it?”

“We rebuilt,” Naruto answers calmly, holding his gaze and trying to keep the guilt he knows is still there at bay. “It’s always been the people who have made Uzushio, not buildings and things. And the people survived. Not all of them, but…some. Enough.”

There’s a flash of black and sea-blue, and with a sharp thud Obito lands on the wall barely ten paces away, the last clone gripped by the throat and dangling from his grasp. There’s no viciousness on his face, no hatred, just…determination. Resignation. Old grief and pain and anger, all buried. All given up, because that’s what Eternal Tsukiyomi is, at heart—one massive, final surrender to the hardships of reality, and it sets Naruto’s teeth on edge.

He’s never been even remotely good at giving up.

Obito tosses the clone away, Kamui-propelled kunai flying after it, and the explosion that follows
shakes the very wall they're standing on. He glances after it for a moment and then looks away, back
to the four standing across from him, and something in his eyes hardens.

“Minato-sensei,” he says evenly. “Back to witness your handiwork? Dying to seal the Kyuubi—it
was such a noble thing to do, wasn’t it? And it made my job easier, as well. No strong Hokage
adored by the village, so tensions rose. The Uchiha started to rebel, and because they had no respect
for the Sandaime, because they’d never considered him fair-minded when his teacher was so very
prejudiced—well. There's no more Uchiha clan now. No one with the ability to control the Kyuubi.
No Hokage good enough at seals to bind it. It’s the most powerful of the bijuu. When I tear it out of
your son and let it loose on your beloved village, how long do you think they’ll last?”

Kurama snarls, and it tears its way out of Naruto's throat as the bijuu rises within him, chakra
redoubling as the fox’s power floods his own. “Kurama isn’t some weapon for you to use!” Naruto
snaps. “He’s my friend, and even if you try to take him over again, the other jinchuuriki will stop
you!”

But Obito never looks at him, eyes fixed on Minato and unwavering. The Yondaime takes a short,
rough breath and steps forward, holding Obito's gaze.

“Kakashi cried for you, when we thought you died,” he says softly, gently. “Obito, we all loved you,
and we missed you. We still do. No matter what this is, no matter what you’ve done, please. Come
home. There's no one in the world who can't be redeemed. There's nothing that can't be fixed with
enough effort.”

Obito laughs, sharp and broken. “You don’t understand,” he says, and it’s completely calm and
even. Naruto would almost feel better if it were wild and unbalanced. “None of you understand. This
whole world isn’t real. Rin isn’t Rin unless she’s alive. Kakashi isn’t Kakashi unless he keeps his
promise. Minato-sensei isn’t Minato-sensei unless he saves all of us. And if they’re not real, none of
this is real. But once I activate the Eternal Tsukiyomi, that world will be the true one. The true Rin
will be there, and Kakashi, and Minato-sensei. And this awful, broken world will cease to exist.”

Minato wavers, expression like someone just scored a killing blow, and steps back. Naruto catches
him with a hand on his shoulder, bracing him, and squeezes gently. That was a hit, and worst of all it
wasn’t even meant to be. Naruto can see in Obito's eyes that he means every word of it. To him, this
world is the illusion.

He wonders grimly just how little joy Obito must have had in his life, to be convinced to such a
thing.

“Can you find Kakashi?” he asks his father softly, the words for his ears alone. “Can you bring him
here? He and Gaara and Fū were facing Pein, in the north. He might be the best one to break
whatever Madara brainwashed Obito with.”

Minato hesitates, looking torn for a brief heartbeat, and then nods, lips quirking in a faint, wry smile.
“He and Kakashi always had a strange relationship,” he agrees, sad and amused in equal measure,
and then gives Naruto something a little closer to a happy grin. “I’ll be back in a flash, Naruto, you
can count on it.”

Yellow light flares and he’s gone, and Naruto doesn’t know whether to laugh or smack his head on
something hard at the horrible pun.

“Do you know who I am, Obito?” Kagami questions, stepping past Sarutobi to face his son, features
set as he plants himself there, a boxer preparing for a match. Verbal, this time, rather than physical,
but Naruto has little doubt it will devolve into the latter shortly. They're not going to have a choice at
some point. Obito wants to fight, and there's still an army to take care of, still Zetsu to kill unless Sasuke's managed it already.

Obito blinks, clearly startled, and studies him for a long moment, eyes narrowed. There's a pause, a beat, and everything in him goes absolutely, perfectly still.

“I had a picture,” he says after a moment. “On my wall. You and a woman, but not an Uchiha, with —”

“With a baby in her arms?” Kagami finishes with a sad smile. “Yeah, that’s Azami and me. I kind of thought Hisae would have tossed it out, after I died, but—I’m glad she didn’t. Did she…ever tell you about me?”

Sarutobi clears his throat, soft and touched with regret as he watches Obito stiffen. “I am afraid,” he says carefully, “that Uchiha Hisae died on a mission about two years after the fall of Uzushio. By that time, Senju Azami had also passed, and there were no other Senju remaining in the village, so her son was taken in by the Uchiha clan as a whole, to the best of my knowledge.”

If that doesn’t count as an “and everything that can possibly go wrong most certainly did” sort of situation, Naruto doesn’t know what would. He studies his friend, watching the slow creep of grief across his face, the regret, the anger. Kagami, despite his bloodline, despite his position, might as well have been an outcast in his own clan as well, though in his case it was by choice. A child born out of wedlock, to a Senju, with all possible parents dead by the time he was three—

Well. That alone would be enough to cause a whole hell of a lot of mental breaks, not even considering what likely happened later, with Madara and Akatsuki.

“…Senju,” Obito repeats flatly. “Senju Azami.” Comprehension is dawning, building to a head of blazing fury just barely blocked by the ice of Obito’s self-control. “That’s why they hated me? Not because I couldn’t activate the Sharingan, but because my mother was a Senju?”

Then he closes his eyes, takes a breath, and when he opens them again all of that emotion is buried, pushed aside and ignored. Obito draws his gunbai again, grasps the chain with a white-knuckled hand, and calls up his Kamui. The world warps around him, but half a second before he can disappear there’s a flash of brilliant yellow light, and a blur of dark blue topped with silver shoots past them and slams into Obito full-on, knocking both of them backwards and into another dimension.

Minato touches down lightly on the wall, cheerful and smiling. “I think,” he says, warm and full of faith, “that Kakashi’s more than willing to knock some sense into him.”

“Well,” Fū mutters kicking a stone and sending it skating across the rocky ground, then over the edge and into the surging sea below. “That was kind of…anticlimactic.”

Gaara glances at her, then at the six corpses crumpled around them on the top of the small island, and doesn’t quite roll his eyes, no matter how he’s tempted. In the distance, there’s a line of white capped with red—Uzushio, bright beneath the noon sun and untouched by the chaos back in Konoha.

“Hm,” is all he says.

The ANBU, mask long since cracked off to reveal a dark-eyed man with high cheekbones, coughs a little as he rises to his feet. “You moved us?” he asks, glancing around them. “Where are we?”
“White Rock,” Fū answers cheerfully, flashing through a quick set of hand seals that make the earth shake. A pit opens up beneath each of the former Paths, just deep enough to serve as a grave, and she closes them again quickly. Gaara can’t say he disagrees with the idea. They’ve already been reanimated once; he’d very much prefer it doesn’t happen again. Maybe, once this is over, they can return and provide a more honorable burial, but for now, this will suffice. “Off the coast of Uzushio. Otherwise known as Training Ground Nine. We mostly use it when we’re practicing our more destructive jutsus.”

Kakashi eyes the deep, spiral gouges carved into the stone near the edge, unmistakably the product of a Rasengan, and hums softly. “I see,” he murmurs. “And is it too much to hope that returning to Konoha will be as simple as getting here?”

Fū scowls at him, dropping her hands on her hips even as her beetle wings flare out in offense. “Simple?” she demands. “Simple? I’d like to see you hop us all the way across Fire Country, Hot Springs Country, Whirlpool Country, and then a good portion of the ocean, too. With, might I add, a seal drawn by someone who doesn’t specialize in them, in the heat of battle, while facing the strongest member of the Akatsuki split into six bodies. Damn it, that was hard. Where’s my respect, huh?”

Gaara considers debating his supposed lack of familiarity with the transport seal—all of the jinchuuriki know it, as a failsafe to escape the Akatsuki if nothing else—but decides that, given the fairly desperate fight they were just engaged in, and how Fū is correct about the matter being far from simple, he can allow it. For now.

“Maa, I didn’t mean it like that,” Kakashi protests mildly, raising one hand in surrender even as the other retrieves his little orange book. The former, at least, is a normal reaction to Fū’s glare. Suigetsu in particular tends to shy away from it, because Fū has been Naruto’s devoted student when it comes to pranks and payback.

With a soft snort, Tenzo reaches for the lone shard of his mask that accompanied them and tucks it into his weapons pouch. “I don’t understand how you can be so popular with girls when you’re absolutely awful at talking to them, senpai,” he informs the other jounin dryly.

“Well, my cute little kouhai, when a man is particularly good with his—”

“OKAY,” Fū says loudly and brightly to drown him out. “WE’RE LEAVING. Everybody hang on to your asses, I’m running a bit lower on chakra than I’d like so this might get bumpy.”

Tenzo goes a little pale at that, while Kakashi’s eyes widen before he can control his expression. Gaara blinks, because as far as he can tell Fū is pretty much fine, what with Chōmei so close to the surface, but when he catches Fū’s eye she just throws him a surreptitious wink and brings her hands down on the edge of Gaara’s sand-seal. Light flares, blinding for a brief handful of heartbeats before it fades away, leaving them right back where they started and only a little worse for wear.

“You,” Kakashi says after a moment of silence, narrowing his eyes at the green-haired girl, “having been living with Naruto for far too long.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” Fū answers primly, brushing a bit of sand off her skirt. She is either ignoring or unaware of the streaks of drying blood painted across it, and Gaara truly couldn’t say which is more likely. “So. Now what?”

Gaara tips his head, considering. “Nagato will be somewhere nearby, but even if Karin can spare her attention to look for him, she will have little luck, given his ability to alter his chakra signature. However, he is functionally immobile, and with the rest of Akatsuki occupied, he won’t be able to
Fū nods, features tightening momentarily before they smooth out again. “And he’s an Uzumaki,” she points out. “If he’s not going anywhere, and he’s not going to cause any more trouble for the time being, we should leave him for Naruto to deal with, since he’s both Clan Head and Uzukage.”

Left unsaid is that if anyone can talk the Rinnegan user down, it’s Naruto. Gaara inclines his head in agreement, then turns to look where a sea of white clones is slowly being eaten away at by shinobi from several different nations. “Then we should offer our assistance,” he says, even as light blooms in the square they originally appeared at, before all of this started. Familiar chakra signatures appear, one after another, and Gaara feels a smile tugging at his mouth entirely against his will.

“Ah,” he says. “I would assume that’s the cavalry.”

Fū laughs, bright and delighted, and leaps into the air, wings buzzing open behind her. “You bet it is!” she crows. “Come on, my lord Jounin Commander, you’ve got troops to boss around.”

Three chakra signatures in particular make Gaara raise one brow, and he calls up his sand, letting it gather beneath his feet. “It seems we’re having a family reunion as well,” he says dryly. “I wonder how Roushi managed that.”

“Ah, I haven’t seen Yugito in months with the stupid Akatsuki creeping around.” Fū is all but vibrating with excitement, but she hesitates long enough to offer the two Konoha jounin a hand. “Want a ride back to the excitement? I can carry one of you, and Gaara can take the other.”

Before either of the jounin can answer, there’s a bright flash of yellow, a flicker-flare of unfamiliar chakra, and a blond man in a long white haori edged with a design of flames lands in the middle of their battlefield.

Kakashi drops his book.

“Minato-sensei?” he demands, sharp and disbelieving, taking a quick step back.

_Naruto_, Gaara wants to say, and judging by the narrowing of her eyes Fū is thinking the same thing. This man looks like Naruto—and moreover, he looks very much like the carving on the mountain above them. That, coupled with the words on the back of his haori and Naruto’s status as a jinchuuriki…

Gaara has a feeling he knows what this man is, even if he doesn’t quite know who.

“Kakashi,” the Yondaime says, warm and fond. “Orochimaru’s jutsu brought me back, if only for a while. But we don’t have much time. Akatsuki’s leader—it’s Obito. He survived, but he’s been… twisted. We need help to break him out of it.”

For a long moment, Kakashi looks like he’s been sent reeling, face going even paler, eyes wider, every muscle strung tense and incredulous. Gaara watches him with concern, almost ready to suggest he sit down and put his head between his knees or something similar. But after another moment, the man shakes it off, raising his hands to press over his face.

“Minato-sensei,” he says, low and wrecked. “But—I broke my promise to him. I can’t—”

“You can,” Minato says, implacable but not unkind, crossing the scarred ground to curl a hand around the nape of the Copy-Nin’s neck. “It’s _Obito_, Kakashi. Your friend. He needs you, and what you can do. What you can be for him. Don’t hesitate. This time, we have the chance to save him.”
Kakashi looks up, Sharingan eye and grey eye both firm and set, the roiling emotions underneath just barely held in check, and nods once, firmly. Minato smiles back, encouraging and kind, and grips his arm. They both vanish in another flash of yellow.

There's a long moment of silence, and then Tenzo huffs out a heavy breath. “I think I'll take that ride, if you're still offering,” he says dryly, and reaches up. Fū chuckles and swoops down, wrapping her arms around his chest from behind and lifting him off the ground.

“Definitely,” she says brightly. “Battlefield, here we come! You're good, Gaara?”

Gaara takes one last look around, half-expecting Nagato to slide out from behind a rock or something, and then inclines his head. “Go,” he agrees. “I will see to the distribution of the others and then join you.”

Fū manages a halfway decent salute, even with her arms full of jounin, and then swoops towards the White Zetsu army without looking back. Gaara heads in the other direction, already able to hear Anzu’s voice rising like the crack of her whip above the din.

Seven jinchuuriki with something to fight for, he thinks, with several villages at their back, against an army of clones with nothing.

And he smiles.

Those are good odds.
Still overloaded with work, still trying to get around it, but my current writing speed is about a paragraph a day, which is...disheartening. And my English is disgustingly rusty right now, gah. Thank you so, so much for all your patience, it really is appreciated. You're truly amazing. <3

(In the process of writing this chapter, I found myself…liking is the wrong word, but perhaps appreciating Itachi in a way I never really have before. And before the mocking starts, let me just say I've heard it all, multiple times, from my bastard of a twin [who I firmly believe is gay for Itachi]. Ahem.)

[Bridge: A transitional passage connecting two sections of a composition.]

There's blood dripping from down his face, sliding into his eyes. Kakashi takes a breath, trying to get his wind back, and wipes it away. At this point it’s anyone’s guess whether it’s from his eye or a cut further up, and Kakashi can't bring himself to care either way.

Because Obito is here. Because Obito is standing across from him, shoulders bowed as he breathes heavily, blood dripping from the corner of his mouth. He hasn’t bothered to brush it off; his eyes are still fixed on Kakashi, the way they have been since the moment Kakashi tackled him into this dimension.

Obito is better than he used to be. His taijutsu is faster, more ruthless, a thousand times more cunning. His ninjutsu actually works now, and does so relentlessly. Kakashi remembers sparring as children, remembers matches that he won as easily as breathing. This isn’t the same boy he fought back then—he’s worlds away, and that much is visible just looking at his face. No smiles, no grins, no laughter. No sheepish gestures and bravado. Just merciless calculation and an almost desperate devotion to his end goal.

But at the same time, Kakashi knows Obito. He’s turned every moment they ever spent together over in his mind a thousand times since his best friend’s death, has clung with blind, desperate devotion of his own to whatever scraps remained, and even if as a child he never cared to see through or look past Obito's masks, he can now. Different masks, a different face, aged and scarred and dangerous, but—

But still Obito. And in the end, that’s all that matters.

Blood splatters on the pale stone below, stark in the strange, sourceless light of this dimension, and Kakashi coughs, pushing himself up so that he’s no longer bracing his hands against his knees. He honestly hasn’t gone all-out like that in a hand-to-hand match since the last time he was stupid enough to agree to a taijutsu-only spar with Gai.

“You're still thinking of her,” he says softly, and the words warp strangely as they emerge.

Obito doesn’t have to ask who he’s talking about. His eyes harden, narrow, and he snarls, “Always. With every waking moment, and then every night in my dreams. Always, everywhere.”
It hurts, even though Kakashi already knew the answer before he asked. “And I let her die. I broke my promise to you, and I killed Rin with my own hands.”

There's a long, heavy moment, the silence as weighty as steel and twice as oppressive. And then, shockingly, Obito shakes his head.

“No,” he answers grimly. “This world let Rin die. You killed her, but you were the just weapon. I wouldn’t blame a sword for cutting. I won't blame you for something you had no choice in. But Rin’s death left this entire world a black hell, and I won't accept that. I won't let the same thing happen again. The bijuu will give me the power to restore happiness to the world. The Rinnegan will bring back those who died, so no one will ever have to suffer loss again. Wouldn’t that be better, Kakashi? Wouldn’t you be happier in a perfect world?”

Kakashi doesn’t pause to think before shaking his head. He thinks of the boy he just passed, a lost student returned. Of the jinchuuriki he fought beside, and the way the Uzushio shinobi gathered and greeted their Kage. A family, rather than subjects, with Naruto at the center of it. Naruto, alive and well and impossibly strong, brighter than ever, with the whole world in his blazing blue eyes. Smiling, unbowed, unbeaten, and all the stronger for his burdens.

For years now, Kakashi has wondered, obsessed over Naruto's reason for leaving. Was he a bad teacher? Was he blind to something he should have seen? Was he cruel? Did he drive Minato's son away by word or deed or carelessness?

But that’s…that’s not it, is it?

Naruto left, but he wasn’t running away. He wasn’t fleeing, and he didn’t cut his ties. He forged ahead, and when the small-mindedness of Konoha's people would have held him back, when he couldn’t see a way to earn their trust and faith but couldn’t wait long enough to find a way, when he saw a need in himself and Gaara and Haku, abandoned and lost and hurting, he had pressed on. He’d done the impossible, come to a solution only Naruto possibly could have reached.

There's no home for us?

Then I’ll build one.

Straightforward, bold, dauntless, unyielding. That’s Naruto down to the very bone.

“You felt it, didn’t you?” he asks instead of answering. “All the jinchuuriki, standing side by side with the rest of us and fighting to keep their homes safe. They're not just weapons anymore. They’ve left the places that thought of them that way and found a home where they can live and be normal people. You want world peace? I think that’s a damn good start.”

Something flickers, just faintly. A moment, an emotion, gone before it can even register, but still there. And that’s hope enough to make Kakashi keep trying.

After all, he’s always been able to get under Obito's skin like no other.

“You’ve been calling yourself Madara,” he says, keeping his voice even. “Have you really given up to that extent?”

Obito’s confusion is easy to read, when Kakashi had so much practice in the past. “What? I haven’t given up—”

“You have.” Kakashi looks up, meets mismatched eyes with his own, and wonders at the conviction in his own voice. Of course, he’s gone twenty years without speaking of this even once; maybe it’s
finally time. “Who are you? Tell me your name.”

There’s no victory in watching Obito falter, only grief.

_If I had been better. If I had been faster. If I hadn’t left him for the sake of the mission. If I’d been a real friend. If if._

_I don’t want a perfect world, but I wouldn’t say no to a chance to do this one over again._

“I’m no one,” Obito finally growls, sharp and hoarse and just barely covering his uncertainty. “It doesn’t matter anymore. I can be Madara, or Tobi, or nameless. As long as I save this world, what does it matter?”

Kakashi lets out a breath, and like a sudden dawn he remembers a day in the training field, watching as Rin once again patched Obito up. Obito had blustered and covered up his pain with empty bravado and Kakashi had pretended not to listen as he waited with Minato. But what Rin had said stayed with him, even back then.

“You keep saying you think of her,” Kakashi murmurs, and it echoes in the suddenly vast silence. “But are you really? Because the Obito I remember keeps his promises, and you didn’t keep that one, did you? You said you wouldn’t hide, but look at you now. When was the last time you were actually Uchiha Obito? Can you tell me?”

Obito goes white, horror and then fury crossing his face in quick succession. “Rin is gone,” he snarls, and there’s something wild in his eyes. “Until I remake everything—”

Carefully, Kakashi keeps his voice mild, even if all he wants to do is yell and scream and break whatever kind of delusional state Obito must have fallen into. “And who will you be afterwards? Madara still? No one? Because I remember, even if you don’t. Rin loved Uchiha Obito.” Obito’s face twists, but before he can interject Kakashi forges ahead. “Rin _loved_ Uchiha Obito. You know she did. But if you aren’t Obito anymore, she wouldn’t give you a second glance. You know that, too. So is it worth it? Becoming someone Rin wouldn’t care about, might even _hate_, just because you’re grieving?”

That earns him another snarl, this time wordless and full of fury. “You don’t _understand_! Rin was _my_ everything! She was everything I ever wanted or needed! Even if she didn’t love me back, that was _fine_, because as long as she was there I could believe there was _something_ good in the world! But she’s _gone_, she _died_, so what does it matter? There’s no one left for me, but I’m keeping my promise. I’m bringing peace, just like we all wanted. Isn’t that enough?”

It’s so very much an Obito answer, no matter how twisted with pain and anger, that Kakashi’s heart aches. Obito has always, _always_ put other people first, before himself, before training, before personal safety—Kakashi’s left eye is proof enough of that.

“Come back,” Kakashi says softly, taking a step forward. Obito falters, almost as if he’s going to retreat, but holds his ground, and Kakashi lets go of all of his instincts, his common sense, his wariness, and reaches out to grip Obito’s shoulder tightly. “Come back. Be Uchiha Obito again. What you’re doing now is a shortcut to the end, and it will only make people hate you and reject your peace.”

Kakashi has been a Konoha shinobi his whole life, practically since he could first hold a kunai. And yet, what comes next is so impossibly, incredibly easy to offer. It’s almost a relief, to finally open his mouth and set the words free. “But let me help you, Obito. Let me support you. Let me be there for you the way I never was before. Look at Naruto. If he can bring together five human weapons and
make them into a family, we can spread peace even to shinobi. It will be hard, and it will take longer than our lifetimes. But we can do it, together. And it will last.”

Obito’s eyes close. His fists clench. He looks down and then away.

Kakashi breathes out a sigh of relief and pulls his best friend closer, wraps his arms around the shorter man and holds on with all the strength remaining in his shaky limbs. And, just for a moment, Obito grips him in return, nearly desperate hands on Kakashi’s shoulder and shuddering breaths against his neck, a muffled sound and then—

A whisper, soft as a butterfly’s kiss against his skin.

“I’m sorry.”

One sharp blow to the back of the head, and all Kakashi knows is darkness.

Raikiri, still his best jutsu, is only so useful against an opponent who can merge with the ground. Sasuke curses softly, straining both senses and his Sharingan as he circles warily, studying his surroundings for any hint that Zetsu might be emerging. There’s only silence, though, an eerie stillness in the forest despite the patter of the rain on the leaves. The hilt of his chokutō is slippery, but Sasuke doesn’t dare release it even enough to get a better grip—Zetsu’s already proved that he’s more than willing to take advantage of even the smallest openings Sasuke gives him.

He doesn’t quite risk a glance over at Naruto’s fight against Madara, but the explosions of chakra have ceased for the moment, and Sasuke won’t let himself so much as consider that it means Madara won. Naruto will win. There’s no doubt; being who he is, Naruto can hardly do anything different.

“You know,” a whispery voice murmurs, and Sasuke narrows his eyes, slowing his steps and trying to pinpoint the source of the sound. “You’re quite good, for someone with only rudimentary training.”

Sasuke snorts, doesn’t even try to restrain himself, because he’s been trained by Copy-Nin Kakashi, by the Sannin Jiraiya. He’s survived four years in ANBU, two years traveling with Jiraiya and playing spy. He had the guts to face down Haku and Orochimaru and an insane jinchuuriki at the age of twelve, regardless of whether he won or not, and he’s only gotten stronger since. He doesn’t lose anymore—won’t, when he knows what’s on the line. Madara might be his ancestor, might be family, but he’s no ally of Konoha, and this is Sasuke's village, his home. He’s not about to let it be destroyed.

Rudimentary training? Maybe it is when compared to someone like Madara, but it’s not Sasuke’s only weapon. He’s fighting for his home, for his friends. For Naruto.

There’s absolutely no doubt that Sasuke will win, either. He will. There's simply no other option he’ll allow himself.

“Come out and face me, coward,” Sasuke invites darkly, tightening his grip on his sword. “I’ll show you just how rudimentary my training is.”

Zetsu chuckles, rough and raspy. “That’s not an insult, boy. You’re strong now. Imagine what you could become if you had someone to truly help you, rather than fumbling in the dark and holding you back the way Konoha has. Imagine how easily you could achieve your revenge then. Your brother would be nothing. You could kill him, gain vengeance for the slaughter of your clan. Justice. Madara could help you. He knows everything there is about the Sharingan. He fought Senju
Hashirama himself to a standstill. Don’t you want power like that? Don’t you want to find Itachi and drive your blade through his heart for everything he’s done?”

Sasuke takes a breath, and it shakes. Not with anger, or fear, or even temptation. All he feels right now is rage, black and thick and choking. It strangles his breath in his throat, makes his heart wrench and pound in his chest, skips across his nerve endings like sharp-edged lightning. Because he’s had enough. Enough of being told what to do or what to be. Enough of being told how he should think, or how he should see things. Enough of being manipulated.

Everyone’s done it. Danzo, Itachi, the Sandaime, Kakashi, Sai, Sakura, and now this creature—they’ve all tried it at one point or another. With good intentions, sometimes, but it’s still manipulation, still an attempt to twist him, change him.

Naruto hasn’t. Naruto has never tried, never come to him as anything more or less than himself, even when hiding behind masks. Their relationship has always been more or less the same, on even and equal ground. And for that, Sasuke will forever be grateful.

But Sasuke is a shinobi—he understands advantages, and though every nerve and instinct in him screams a denial, he allows his tense muscles to ease, his grip to loosen on his chokutō. He straightens from his half-crouch, eyes narrowing, and though he keeps moving, keeps scanning his surroundings, Sasuke allows his body language to read interested.

“You're Akatsuki,” he says flatly, and it takes every ounce of experience and skill he has to keep it neutral. “Why would you help me against one of your own?”

There’s a ripple of earth and Zetsu rises like a plant in full growth, the look on his inhuman face smug and satisfied, a Venus flytrap that just tricked and trapped a whole swarm. “Ah, but your brother is weak, and isn’t it natural to want to remove the weak from the pack? To thin out those who won’t benefit us? We’re trying to change the world, little Uchiha. Can’t you believe in a goal like that? Wouldn’t you like a world without lies or treachery?”

There, in the trees behind Zetsu—a shadow, just the barest indication of movement, but the Sharingan sees it. Sasuke doesn’t look, doesn’t give whoever it is away. Enemy or ally, either might give him the opening he need here.

“Weak?” he asks instead, and it comes out derisive even though he isn’t trying. “Itachi?”

A shift in the shadow, a slight but silent tensing, and Sasuke's breath almost catches, he’s forced to wonder—

“Soften Zetsu murmurs, gliding closer. “Too easily swayed by emotion, too dismissive of strength. Don’t you remember that night? He scorned you so readily, called you weak. He didn’t bother to kill you. Why not take advantage of that and get your revenge? You’ve been waiting so patiently, Uchiha. Isn’t it time to push forward?”

The rage coils and twists in his gut like a living thing, like a dragon, vicious and unrelenting. Leverage, he thinks again, the same way he did when he first heard the truth behind the massacre. I was leverage against my brother.

And it’s harder to remember now, after so many years pushing the memories away, but he can still recall his brother’s touch, a hand on his shoulder, a ruffle of his hair, a gentle poke in the forehead. Sasuke worshipped Itachi, loved him to the point of awe, and Itachi never, ever did anything to hurt him. Not until that night, when refusing Danzo's orders would have meant Sasuke's death.
He doesn’t understand it, not completely. Can’t quite wrap his head around why Itachi was so intent on having Sasuke come after him. But there’s a reason, he’s sure. Penance, maybe, or atonement. Maybe there’s some hidden agenda Sasuke doesn’t have the knowledge to figure out. But that he even tried to set such a thing up is enough.

Despite the years and leagues and betrayals between them, Sasuke is still a boy who loves his brother. Hating him never killed that, not completely, and Sasuke thinks that’s probably one of the reasons he’s always tried to bury the hurt and ache of it beneath rage and revenge. Because once upon a time he loved his brother more than anything in the world, and for an Uchiha such a thing is never safe to do. Love is their downfall, and always has been.

But Zetsu is watching him, is looking at him like there's no path Sasuke can follow but his, and Sasuke buries his rage to meet the creature’s gaze. Smug and confident, Zetsu holds his eyes, and that’s all the opening Sasuke needs.

Genjutsus are simple, light and easy to break. But their power lies in the fact that no one recognizes them as even being cast, and when they're cast with the Sharingan that’s doubly true.

A touch of chakra, a breath, and Zetsu is Sasuke's to twist as he wills it. Sasuke takes great pleasure in stopping his ears, constraining his sight, until his senses are wrapped in impenetrable cotton. A flick of his hand, like he’s shaking life back into his fingers after too long clutching his sword, but it’s an ANBU sign for trapped. If that shadow is an enemy, they won't understand, but if it’s a friend, Sasuke just gave them the perfect opening.

And the shadow moves, swift and utterly silent, blurring through the trees. A flash of red-and-black eyes, a twist of one hand, and black fire blooms, wrapping around Zetsu like a grasping hand. Zetsu lets out a cry that falls somewhere between a snarl and shriek, leaping away, but he can't escape it, can't put it out even though it burns him alone, and Sasuke watches with something like vicious satisfaction as the creature is reduced to nothing more than ash.

Only then does he turn and look at his brother, leaning against the trunk of a tree. Itachi looks back at him, so much older and wearier than he was the last time Sasuke saw him, face lined and skin pale. There’s a crow perched on a branch above him, one Sharingan eye fixed on Sasuke, and Sasuke regards it suspiciously for a moment before dropping his gaze back to Itachi.

Another moment of silence, tense and wary, and then Sasuke lets out a short, sharp breath and sheathes his chokutō. “Forgive me, aniki,” he says evenly. “You wanted us to have the same eyes the next time we met. I've failed you.”

That makes something in Itachi’s face tighten, even as it softens his gaze, and an emotion very much like regret slides across his features. “No, otouto,” he answers softly, and doesn’t let his gaze waver. “I believe I should be saying that to you.”

Sasuke curls his fingers around his sword’s hilt, then forces them to relax. He’s tense and twitchy, can't get his mind to settle, because even with his focus on finding Naruto he had always thought of one day getting revenge. Vaguely, sometimes, or distantly, but the thought was still there. And now, less than a week after finding out the truth behind the massacre, he is…torn. Twelve years of hatred can't be dismissed so quickly.

But—

“Mother and Father,” he says, and his voice shakes no matter how he tries to steady it. “They—”

Itachi closes his eyes, and for the first time Sasuke can see the raw, ragged agony on his face. “They
asked that I take care of you,” he answers, barely louder than a breath. “It was…their last request.”

Sasuke curls a hand into a fist, tightening it until his nails dig into his palm and his eyes have stopped burning. He doesn’t want to hear that, but…he can’t **not** hear it. Not if he wants to hold onto his hope of understanding his feelings for his brother. “They knew?”

“Well, they suspected,” Itachi affirms, sad and tired and so very, very strong under this weight. His eyes are still closed, but he presses a hand over them, hiding his expression. Not enough of it for Sasuke to miss the regret carved into every line, though. His voice really does shake as he adds with aching disbelief, “They…called me gentle.”

And, no matter how hard it was for Sasuke to bear the deaths of his clan, to grow up alone, he can’t imagine how much harder it was for his brother, who always hated violence, to bear their murders. Can’t imagine the guilt and impotent anger and relief and duty, all tangled up and twisted together, or how anyone could stay sane in the face of that. Remembers again his thoughts when Naruto told him, how instead of madness causing the massacre, the massacre caused Itachi’s madness, and maybe he didn’t stay sane. Maybe it’s all he can do to cling to sanity by his fingertips, but it’s…enough.

Sasuke can bear this. He can accept this. Maybe someday he’ll even be able to love his brother the way he used to, easily and without reservation.

Not now, perhaps not anytime soon, but…

“You are,” he says, turning away even as Itachi’s hand drops, and his older brother looks at him with something close to astonishment. Stubbornly, he keeps his gaze fixed on the pile of ashes that once was Zetsu. “You…always were.”

There’s a long, long pause, and then Itachi chuckles, soft and aching but warm. “You’ve grown, Sasuke. You are…so very strong. I'm proud of you.” Another pause, and when Sasuke chances a glance back Itachi is smiling at him, so very much the brother he used to be. “Even if you haven’t done a single thing as I planned or predicted since your teammate left.”

Sasuke snorts before he can help himself, a smile of his own tugging at his lips. There’s a strange lightness in his chest, like a great weight has been lifted from him, one he didn’t even realize he was carrying. “Naruto has a way of screwing everything up,” he agrees dryly. “Even things he isn’t supposed to be involved in.”

Itachi crosses the space between them in four quick steps, and reaches out deliberately. When Sasuke doesn’t flinch away, Itachi grips his shoulder gently, pulls him around until they’re facing each other and leans forward. He rests his forehead against Sasuke’s and murmurs, “I'm grateful to him, then.”

“So am I,” Sasuke whispers back, closing his eyes. It’s not perfect, is nowhere near it, but that’s fine. Nothing in Sasuke’s life has ever been perfect, and he’ll adjust, just as he always has.

Itachi’s smile is small and sad, but there’s a brightness to it as well—something like hope. “You never have to forgive me, Sasuke. But no matter what happens to you, no matter what path you take, I will always love you.”

Forgiveness will be hard. It might very well be the hardest thing Sasuke has ever done in his life. But then, the most worthwhile things always are.

“I know,” he answers, one hand finding his brother’s wrist and gripping tightly. Then the flare and flash of chakra draws his attention, and he forces himself to step back and look away. “Come on.
We’re needed.”

Itachi twists his hand to grip Sasuke’s wrist in return, squeezing lightly, and then lets go. “So we are,” he agrees, and falls into step with Sasuke as they head back towards the wall.
Finale: Broken Absolution, Allegro to Adagio

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[Allegro: A direction to make the tempo fast and lively.

Adagio: From the expression ad agio, ‘at ease’; to be played slowly, restfully.]

With so many powers present on the field, it’s less of a battle and more of a rout of the Zetsu clones. Tsunade can’t really say she cares.

She goes in low, a hard punch shattering the ground beneath a knot of clones’ feet, and a fire jutsu roars past her, a bare inch above her head. Wind follows it with a tearing shriek, and the flame erupts into a gout of heat and destruction, reducing the targets to nothing more than charred corpses within moments. Tsunade pushes to her feet as Jiraiya and Orochimaru land on either side of her, already lunging, and follows without having to ask what the plan is.

This is familiar. This is stepping down a ladder in the dark with nothing to catch one’s foot or make one falter. This is what’s been missing in her life for more than thirty years, and she finds she’s grinning, small and sharp and fierce. Orochimaru on her left and Jiraiya on her right, enemies in front of them and no need to hold back or show mercy. Constructs, clones, all of them, and Tsunade plows into a pair aiming for Orochimaru’s back, lays them out and forges on. With a snarl, she seizes one unfortunate clone who’s trying to grab Jiraiya, lifts it right off its feet even though it’s a good five inches taller than her, and chucks it as hard as she can.

It’s only after it’s left her hand that she remembers they’re hardly alone on the battlefield, and winces. Right in the path of the clone’s flight, there’s a man with red hair and a sharply pointed beard, clad in deep blue and dove-grey and wearing an Uzushio hitai-ate tied on his brow. Tsunade opens her mouth to call a warning, but before she can the man twists, ducks, and comes up with a surge of molten rock following his kick. It consumes the clone, even as the creature is punted straight into another knot of its fellows. The redheaded man sends a surge of lava washing over them with a wave of his hand, then salutes Tsunade with a sharp grin and turns away.

There are four thick lines extending from the spiral on his hitai-ate, and Tsunade wonders what it means.

Then, with a deep-throated roar, the redhead brings his hands together, chakra surging and snapping around him, and his body wavers. Half a moment later, a gigantic four-tailed ape is in his place, and it wades into the fight with a booming laugh. Ahead of him, clones are piling together, bodies twisting and merging, but the Yonbi never pauses before it slams right into them.

Oh, Tsunade thinks a little weakly, because she’s used to how shinobi fight, used to power and bloodlines and abilities that leave civilians staring in terrified awe, but to see a jinchuuriki use their powers so easily, with such control, makes her brain more or less grind to a halt.

And the redheaded man is hardly alone in his use of a tailed beast. Above their heads, a girl with beetle wings is swooping here and there, flashes of blinding light following her. Following closely behind is a woman with long claws on her hands and feet, slicing through the blinded clones with single-minded purpose. Another redheaded man—this one younger, lean instead of burly—stands on the western edge of the battlefield, feet planted as he directs a surge of sand to fight for him.
Somewhere else, there’s a man’s loud laughter, shouted raps that make those around him cringe even as tentacles fling opponents left and right. And in the center of the field, a vast slug with six tails is decimating clones with something that eats and burns like acid.

Six jinchuuriki on the same field, all fully in control of themselves and their tailed beasts. Tsunade feels a little light-headed just thinking about the implications.

Especially since four of them are wearing Uzushio’s hitai-ate.

When she drags her wandering attention back under control and faces forward again, the clones in front of her team have started merging, too, twisting together and rising up like a monster from a child’s nightmare. Tsunade feels her breath catch in her throat, but plants her feet and clenches her fists, dropping into a ready stance.

“Plan?” Jiraiya asks, eyeing the thing as it grows.

Orochimaru snorts, shaking out his sleeves and sizing the creature up with a tip of his head. “I’m astonished you’re bothering to ask, Jiraiya. Don’t you want to charge at it headfirst and let it eat you?”

“Hey!” Jiraiya protests, pinning the Snake Sannin with a deeply offended glare. “Who was it that insisted a room was empty and that it was a perfect opportunity to check for records, only to have us burst in on a meeting of the leaders?”

“And who was planning on just bolting straight across the border into a trap?” Orochimaru retorts acidly, eyes narrowing sharply. “At least I—”

“Boys,” Tsunade cuts in, and it’s truly a curious feeling to suffer from both an oncoming headache—or two of them, more to the point—and a deep surge of nostalgic fondness at the same time. “Can we focus on the twenty-foot-tall monster in front of us and leave the bickering until later, please?”

Orochimaru sniffs like he has no idea what she’s berating him for, but obediently turns his attention to the massed clones. “Lightning,” he offers, hands already coming up to form the necessary seals.

Jiraiya scoffs. “In this weather? Teme, think of the collateral damage! With this much water on the ground, we’d take out half of our own forces.”

“No lightning, not until we have the barrier up.”

With a roll of his eyes, Orochimaru leaps forward in a blur, Kusanagi already in hand. Tsunade rolls her eyes right back, even as she follows him. A single punch sends the creature reeling, and Orochimaru carves off an arm before grasping branch-like tentacles force him to leap away. The creature regrows its arm, but it shrinks it body to do so, and Tsunade smiles grim with satisfaction.

Orochimaru lands beside her, light on his feet, and they move together, Tsunade aiming low as her teammate aims high, and the giant clone staggers back again, almost falling.

“The ground!” Orochimaru calls, fending off several branches at once, and then has to leap aside as another clone emerges under his feet, but Tsunade catches his meaning in a moment. The rain is torrential and unrelenting, and there’s already a good amount of water pooled all around them. She brings her hands together, flickering through seals, and the ground gives way beneath the creature’s feet, widening into a deep curve. Water rushes in, pooling at the bottom and rising even as she watches, and a simple wave of Orochimaru’s hand brings more cascading down, until the creature is
just about knee-deep in it.

“Ready!” Jiraiya shouts, and Tsunade springs back, Orochimaru mirroring her, until they're each standing at one of the three seals Jiraiya has carved into the ground. She slams her hand down, chakra flaring around her before it erupts, leaping from her seal to Jiraiya’s, then on to Orochimaru’s and right back to her. The moment it steadies, Orochimaru rises, hands flickering through familiar seals. One palm against the barrier, a murmured phrase, and then the crackle and flare of far too much lightning for comfort surges between them, leaving Tsunade all but deaf and blind as it rages.

The smell of scorched plant matter lingers in the air as her senses finally begin to clear, and she shakes her head to get the ringing out of her ears as she stands. Across from her, a cloud of smoke hits Jiraiya in the face and makes him cough, and he waves it away with an annoyed expression that just barely hides his grin.

“Damn, Orochi, was that compensation for something? You know, everyone’s different. There's no need to be ashamed of—ow!”

“Idiot!” Orochimaru hisses, looking for all the world like he's about to remove Jiraiya's head from his shoulders in addition to smacking him. But Tsunade has known him all of her life, can read him like an open picture book, and there's definitely embarrassment beneath the bluster. “Shut your fool mouth, Jiraiya, or I will shut it for you.”

Jiraiya crosses his arms and directs a scowl at the other man. “No matter how much chakra you used, that still only counts as one kill,” he retorts almost peevishly, and Tsunade has to roll her eyes again, because really? That’s what he’s focusing on here?

“It counts as one each. We all helped kill it,” she intervenes, reaching out and, in an unfortunately very familiar motion, grabbing both of them by ear. Jiraiya yelps, Orochimaru winces, but they're both accustomed enough to this maneuver to go with it as she pulls them forward. Protests notwithstanding, of course.

“Ow, ow, ow, hime, please—”

“Tsunade, stop, we have discussed this—”

“Oh, shut up, both of you! I've had enough!” she snaps right back, shifts her grip to seize each of them by the collar, and then sets her feet and flings them right into another group of Zetsu clones. It’s like bowling, she thinks a little whimsically, and not without a touch of mischief, as she watches her teammates knock the clones right off their feet and then roll back upright and gamely start laying out around them. Pushing up her sleeves, Tsunade makes to follow them, only to feel eyes on her. She spins, fists coming up automatically, and finds herself staring into the face of a man she hasn’t seen in over half a century.

“Grandfather?” she asks, and her voice breaks halfway through, because it’s one thing to see him at a distance, just passing by, but it’s another entirely to come face-to-face like this, to find him watching her with an unreadable expression on his wise, kind face.

“Tsunade,” he answers with a warm, soft smile, reaching out to touch her cheek. “Look at you!”

Then Jiraiya shouts, Orochimaru hisses, and Tsunade finds herself moving before she even thinks about it, plunging into the fray and back to her teammates’ sides. They leave a pile of defeated clones behind them, and when she finally manages to glance back, Hashirama is still watching her. If anything, his smile is wider now, brilliant and proud, and Tsunade's breath catches somewhere around her heart, filling her chest with warmth and a happy sort of gratification.
Always, always she’s wanted to be the kind of Hokage that would make her grandfather and
granduncle and teacher proud of her, and maybe, just maybe, she’s actually succeeded.

“Come on, you're falling behind!” Jiraiya calls, laughing and bright even as he calls up a Rasengan.
“This another bet you're going to lose, Tsunade?”

“Not on your life!” she retorts, dodging a burst of weak mokuton and crushing the attacking clone’s
head with a single blow.

“So far, you're *both* losing,” Orochimaru reminds them smugly, shaking a bit of plant matter off his
sword. “After all, I am the one who called back—”

“Wait just one damned minute here,” Jiraiya cuts in, voice full of affronted dignity. He pauses, still
holding on to a slumped clone, to scowl at Orochimaru. “You do *not* get to add whatever the
resurrected Hokage kill to your total. That’s *cheating*, teme, and this time I won't let it slide, you hear
me?”

Orochimaru’s eyes narrow, and he casually decapitates a trio of clones before turning to face Jiraiya
squarely. “And why would it be?” he demands. “It was my jutsu that called them, therefore they can
be considered of my creation and—”

“Just because you used a creepy zombie-jutsu it doesn’t mean—”

“It most certainly *does*—”

“Does *not*, because if I called up a summons you’d claim *that* didn’t count, so—”

“A summoning is a simple application of widespread knowledge. Edo Tensei is far more
sophisticated and—”

“BOYS.” Tsunade raps their heads together sharply, ignoring the twin protests the move gets her.
“Do I need to throw you around some more? Move it! We’ve got a fight to win!”

“But hime—”

“Tsunade—”

“MOVE IT.”

Even after thirty years apart, they know better than to argue with that tone of voice, and lunge
forward obediently, heading for where a knot of chuunin are pinned down. Tsunade risks one more
glance back and finds her grandfather in the crowd again. He’s laughing, barely able to keep on his
feet from the force of it as he hangs on to Tobirama’s armor. Tobirama rolls his eyes heavenward,
longsuffering, but then meets her gaze with a smile of his own and nods, just once.

It’s all she needs, and Tsunade beams back, then spins on her heel and follows her boys without
another hesitation.

The whirl and warp of Kamui is slower this time, almost casual as it reappears, but Naruto tenses at
the sight of it. He’s crouched on his heels, Kagami on one side and his father on the other, Sarutobi
wary and silent behind them, because at this point there’s really nothing to do but wait. Either
Kakashi can make his argument or not, but either way, it’s out of their hands.
Naruto has faith in himself, knows that he can usually get people to see an issue in a new light and moderate their actions, but for Obito, who’s been twisted and turned around and whose Will of Fire is so deeply buried as to be unreachable, the matter isn’t so simple. Bringing him around on Naruto’s own would take a miracle, or a fight desperate and widespread enough to level Konoha in the process. He can't risk that, won't, because for all that it’s not his home anymore Konoha is still Sasuke’s home, still belongs to so very many of his precious people. And Naruto isn’t good at waiting, has always loathed sitting on his hands and leaving work to other people, but—

He chokes on a breath, bolting to his feet as Obito appears, a limp, lanky body cradled carefully in his arms. Kakashi is completely still, utterly motionless, and Naruto takes one step forward with his chakra building dangerously before he catches the faint rise and fall of the Copy-Nin’s chest and feels relief crash over him like a wave.

“Kakashi,” Minato breathes from behind him, obviously seeing the same thing.

Obito looks down at his old teammate for a long moment, face frozen in the same grim, weary expression he’s worn throughout this whole fight, and then drops to one knee and lays Kakashi out on the ground. There's absolutely nothing rough about his movements—on the contrary, he’s startlingly gentle, positioning limbs for comfort before he stands again, stepping away.

“Obito,” Kagami tries, sharp and almost accusing, though there's something desperate to it as well.

Obito looks back at Kakashi one more time, then turns to face them squarely, chin lifting. Naruto recognizes the gesture. It’s one of Kagami’s, and he saw it as Arashi enough to know it only comes when Kagami is at his most intractable, when he’s dug his heels in and won't be moved for all the gold or good luck in the world. It’s probably too much to hope that his son isn’t the same.

“I couldn’t let him stop me,” Obito says, but Naruto looks up, eyes widening, because for the first time there's a waver in his voice. For the first time, there's something in his eyes beyond surprise or grim and empty determination.

Naruto knows just how good a shinobi Kakashi is, knows just how wide his skillset is. But for all of that, Obito is strong, trained by Madara himself, with the Mangekyo Sharingan and Hashirama’s mokuton and decades of honing his abilities to the absolute maximum. To someone that powerful, Kakashi is a threat, but likely not that much of one.

So it isn’t through force that Obito was worried about Kakashi stopping him. Not by actions, but… words.

Because somewhere deep down, buried under hate and grief and rage, Obito is still a Konoha shinobi, with all the implications of being so. Because regardless of Madara’s aims of destroying Konoha and everyone in it, Obito wants to save the world, end suffering and loss. It’s a twisted, broken way of doing so, maybe, but he’s hardly a figure of irredeemable evil.

He’s killed and manipulated and played with lives, is responsible for so much suffering and loss, but Naruto can look past that, to what’s buried.

Obito can still be saved, no matter what he’s done.

There’s a small noise, a shift and a sound, and Obito glances to where Kakashi lies again. Just briefly, and with his emotions still masked, but it’s enough. When he turns back, his expression is… strange. There's something in it that Naruto can't read, something he can't even begin to understand no matter how his gut is screaming at him that it's important.
Torn, Naruto realizes with a start. Obito looks torn when he hasn’t so much as wavered in his goal before, and that can only be Kakashi’s doing. He takes another step forward, reaching out, and Sharingan eyes snap back to him. This time, Naruto can see the conflict in them, though he isn’t certain as to its cause. But Obito only looks at him for a brief moment before glancing away, towards Kagami.

“You're an Uchiha,” he says after a moment, hands curling into fists at his sides. His composure is breaking rapidly now, falling away in pieces and leaving an angry, emotionally battered man behind. “You were in love, and the world took that away from you.” Took you away from me, he doesn’t say, but Naruto has experienced enough loneliness to hear it like an echo behind his words. “How can you just stand there? Don’t you want to do something about it? Don’t you want to make it so no one else ever feels that again?”

Kagami sighs and steps forward, laying a hand on Naruto's shoulder as he steps past in silent signal to let him handle this. Naruto grimaces, but retreats a step to stand beside his father again. His friend pushes forward until he’s standing right in front of Obito, square and steady and unmoving. “No,” he says firmly. “I don’t. That’s not how the world works. That’s not how it should work. Everyone here has lost someone precious, but…” He trails off with a faint smile, and shakes his head. “Orochimaru pulled us back to this plane, and I can't remember the Pure Land, but…I know I was there. I know it was beautiful, and peaceful, and I'm absolutely certain that when I go back there, Azami will be waiting to show me the way. And when it’s your time to die, Rin will be waiting to guide you across, too. It's loss, yes, but not forever. Just—parting, for the moment. And it hurts, I know, but it will end, and there will be happiness after that. This world isn’t the only one, Obito. This isn’t the be-all and end-all of existence. I know it’s hard to think of such things right now, but please. Look around you. Don’t you want this girl you loved to be able to greet you with a smile when it’s time for you to see her again?”

Obito turns away with a snarl somewhere between grief and rage that’s all but wrenched out of him, hurrying forward and slamming his fist into the trunk of a tree. Naruto winces at the crack of breaking bones and splintering wood, but Obito doesn’t even seem to notice. His teeth are bared, his face twisted with emotion, and his shoulders heave as he fights for control of himself.

“…can't stop me,” he whispers, and Naruto can't quite hear the words before that, even though he knows there were some. Important, he knows. Vital. This is—

Obito raises his head to look at them, but his eyes are empty, blank. “You can't stop me,” he says again, but this time it’s a plea, falling in a desperate tumble from his lips as he staggers upright. “You can't stop me, I can't stop, you can’t—”

A flutter of wings, a rustle of leaves, and a crow alights on the branch above his head, settling and then cocking its head to look down at them all with one blood-red eye.

Footsteps, then, and Naruto turns, half-expecting some enemy to come bursting out, but instead his heart turns over in his chest, because it’s Sasuke emerging from the trees, wary Sharingan eyes flickering over the group. He pauses on Minato, and then again on Kagami and Obito, but it’s Naruto his eyes finally settle on, and with a single quick bound he’s at Naruto's side, one hand on his chokutō.

“You're all right?” he asks, surveying Obito warily and then glancing back at the blond, clearly checking for injuries.

“Dead,” a new voice murmurs, and it’s not the shock it should be to see Itachi following Sasuke out of the shadows, not after everything that’s happened today. The former Clan Heir bows to the two Hokage politely, and then turns to the unfamiliar Uchiha. He pauses for a moment, the only evidence of his surprise, and then glances between Obito and Kagami with a perfectly even expression. “I... see I was wrong in assuming Madara was behind all of this. My mistake.”

“Not really,” Naruto says cheerfully, rocking back on his heels and raising a brow at his boyfriend. Sasuke raises one right back, looking entirely all right with having his brother at his back, and Naruto takes that to mean they’ve at least started to work things out. “He’s been pretending to be Madara for about twenty years now. I can see where someone would get confused.’’

“Giving up so easily, Itachi?” Obito asks, but he’s not looking at the other Uchiha as he drags a hand over his face, shaking his head as though to clear it, and his voice is absent more than biting. “Where is that will I so admired?”

The crow shuffles slightly in place and croaks out an eerie cry.

Itachi smiles faintly. “It has never left this village,” he answers. “I am, as I have always been, a loyal shinobi of Konoha.”

“A pity,” Obito murmurs, and Kamui warps around him as he vanishes from sight.

Instantly, Naruto tenses and spins, and without so much as a heartbeat of hesitation Sasuke does the same, placing himself at Naruto's back with his chokutō in hand. Naruto flips Sāji around, wary of even the faintest flicker of chakra, and asks, “Kagami? Can you do anything?”

Kagami shakes his head as he moves to guard Sarutobi's flank, Minato hovering over Kakashi's still form with a kunai in hand. “No. Our Kamui must connect to different dimensions. Your guess is as good as—”

Rain, twisting ever so slightly out of its normal path as the warp begins, and Naruto feels it. He lunges forward and to the left, and the naginata intercepts a hail of kunai thrown at impossible speeds right before they reach Itachi. Half an instant later Sasuke is at his side, dragging Naruto out of the way as fire erupts where he was standing, and Naruto moves with him, takes the momentum and uses it, but Obito's gunbai blocks Sāji’s blade before it can strike. A flash of yellow light, movement too fast to follow, and Minato bowls Obito over bodily, then just barely manages to dodge a burst of reaching branches.

Kamui again, but this time its spiral spins in the opposite direction, and the deadly sharp mokuton vanishes into another dimension. Kagami wades in, but is immediately knocked back by the gunbai, crashing into the battered wall with a shout. Growling, Naruto throws himself forward, arcs of wind leaving his fingertips with deadly force, but Obito passes right through the jutsu, right through Naruto, and Naruto immediately whirls even though he knows it’s too late, too slow, and—

Raikiri crackles to life as Sasuke meets his cousin with a snarl, punching right through his chest in what should be a killing blow. But Obito laughs at him, hollow and humorless, and vanishes like a ghost without any care for the hole where his heart should be. Sarutobi nearly catches a gout of fire to the face before he ducks and spins, turning the fire right back on Obito, and Naruto and Minato both take the opening, lunging from either side. Naruto goes high, naginata driving forward even as wind and water begin to swirl around the blade, while Minato aims lower, his kunai going for a stomach blow. Obito flicks a hand, mokuton erupting from the ground like spears to knock Minato off course, and then he reaches out to duck under Naruto's blow and catch Sāji by the haft, attempting to wrench it right out of Naruto's hands.
But Naruto knows that trick, knows how to beat it, because Haku likes to do that, too, and he just tightens his grip and directs his chakra to his feet, kicking off to flip right over Obito’s head and throw him off balance when he refuses to release the naginata. And, in the half-second that Obito can’t quite find his footing, Sasuke takes advantage, wrapping Obito in ninja wires and sending lightning racing down the strands. Obito cries out, staggering and nearly falling as the smell of scorched meat fills the air. Naruto gags on it, remembering Uzushio, remember when the city began to burn and there was no one left to put it out, but he pushes forward, trying for the same blow that knocked Danzo out, when—

“Stop,” Itachi says, utterly mild, but it nevertheless rings over the battlefield, stilling all of the combatants in their tracks. Naruto freezes, startled, and meets Sasuke’s equally confused stare over a motionless Obito’s shoulder.

But even after a long moment, Obito stays motionless. Naruto draws back warily, searching for some sort of trap, but there is none. Obito isn’t moving, his face unnaturally blank, his eyes closed as he sways slightly in place. It’s as though he’s a marionette, and someone just cut his strings.

The crow gives another short cry and drops down to land on Itachi’s outstretched arm, and its red eye has faded back to plain black. Itachi strokes a hand over its feathers, then looks up to meet the five baffled gazes currently fixed on him.

“A gift,” he says, then raises his arm and lets the crow take flight again. “I believe Shisui would have been most pleased to know his sacrifice could put an end to this fight.”

Sarutobi makes a noise somewhere between a chuckle and a sigh, finally relaxing from his taijutsu stance to remove his helmet and run a hand over his head. “Indeed,” he agrees wearily, and then nods to the rest of them. “It’s over. Kotoamatsukami is not something that can be shaken off or broken once it’s completed. Obito is no longer our enemy.”

“He has accepted that what you have told him is true,” Itachi agrees. “His full loyalty is to Konoha once more.”

Kagami blows out an aggrieved breath, dragging himself out of the hole he made in the wall and staggering upright. “Wonderful,” he says dryly, approaching as Sasuke withdraws his ninja wire, and stepping forward in time to catch his son as Obito starts to fall. “Now who’s going to help me put him over my knee?”

The release of tension is like a flood of relief, filling him all the way down to his toes, and Naruto plants Sāji’s metal-capped butt in the earth and leans against it, all but boneless. “That responsibility is all your,” he counters. “You’re his father, not me.”

“Technically, you’re his godfather,” Kagami points out.

Naruto snorts. “Technically, I’m not. Seeing as Uzumaki Arashi died several decades ago, and I’m Uzumaki Naruto, I have nothing to do with your son.”

Kagami blinks. His eyebrows go up, then up again, as though attempting to merge with his hairline, and then—

“Naruto,” he says, voice full of glee and a wide, wicked, absolutely delighted grin spreading over his face. “Naruto. Whatever sorry bastard fathered you—”

“Hey!” Minato protests.

“—actually named you Naruto,” Kagami forges on, as though he didn’t hear the interruption. He lets
out a crow of absolute mirth and no little victory, and levels an accusing finger at his friend. “I was right.”

Naruto, knowing exactly what this is about, borrows Kurama's vocals to direct a spine-chilling growl at the Uchiha. “Kagami, don’t you dare—”

Kagami just hoots with unrestrained laughter. “You were reincarnated as a fishcake, oh gods. I told you, fishcake, I warned you, but—ow!”

“I also remember some sort of promise to die laughing,” Naruto growls, raising Sāji threateningly again. “So? Go on, I'm waiting.”

Sarutobi covers his eyes with a longsuffering sigh, and mutters, “I’d forgotten. You two are even worse than Jiraiya and Orochimaru, how could I have forgotten?”

“Naruto is a perfectly good name!” Minato protests. “It’s from a book! An important, highly respectable book!”

Sasuke rolls his eyes, reaching out to grip Naruto's shoulder, and Naruto turns to look at him with his cheeks still faintly flushed. He catches Sasuke's gaze and smiles apologetically, mouth curving up into a grin when he sees the humor in dark eyes. “We won,” he says, just for Sasuke's ears. “We won.”

“We did,” Sasuke agrees. “Together, we all did.”

Naruto laughs, and when Sasuke pulls him forward, he goes with it, letting Sāji fall to the ground as arms wind around his waist. He reaches up, sliding one hand into Sasuke's hair to pull him close, and Sasuke kisses him like breathing, like it’s absolutely the most necessary thing to him. Like any space between them is too much. Naruto kisses back just as desperately, feeling the ebb and flow of fading chakra in the distance as all of the fighting winds down, as the world settles back into normal shinobi levels of calm, and this is a victory.

This is success, like honey on his tongue, Sasuke's mouth slanting over his and strong hands curled around his hips. Like the press of fingers against his skin, even through layers of clothes, and the feel of Sasuke’s slick-silk hair sliding through his own fingers. Sasuke nips at his lips and Naruto tugs on his hair in return, and it makes them both smile, both grin even as they wind around each other. Never before has Naruto believed in the romantic ridiculousness Karin is so fond on—he’s always scoffed at things like ‘two hearts beating in perfect unison’, but—

But this, he thinks, gleeful and glorying in something so perfectly, effortlessly simple—this is probably about as close as real life comes. And it’s theirs.

Chapter End Notes

The idea of using Kotoamatsukami in such a way is borrowed—with permission—from the fic Do Over by Kyogre on fanfiction.net, and will at some point probably become entirely its own fic, because apparently in my brain anything plus Obito equals new fic. Sigh…
Finale: Sonata for a Moment's Solace

Chapter Notes

So I have no excuse for my lateness except that I got distracted writing five-ish different time travel stories for my twin, and time travel for me is like crack. Very, very good crack. :/

That said, there will be one more ‘finale’ chapter, and then the coda. Two more chapters and I am done. And then I’m not going to so much as contemplate writing another monster multi-chapter fic for months.

(Ignore the fact that this is totally what I said when I finished backslide. I mean it this time. Really.)

[Sonata: Music of a particular form consisting of four movements. Each of the movements differ in tempo, rhythm, and melody, but are held together by subject and style. Usually the first movement of the piece serves as the exposition, a development, or a recapitulation.]

The fighting tapers off almost completely by early afternoon. Sakura finishes repairing a Kiri nin’s crushed ankle and looks up for her next patient, only to realize that she hasn’t heard any new cries for medics in a while. Across the prone body, her partner, who’s been assisting her for several hours now, looks back, and Sakura is struck speechless at the sight of who it is.

Looking equally startled, Kabuto just blinks back.

It’s sheer instinct that has Sakura on her feet, reaching for her gloves, but before she can Kabuto casts her a droll look, huffs, and points to his hitai-ate, which bears a tight spiral within a circle. Sakura deflates with a sigh, shaking her head. Naruto. Of course it was Naruto.

It helps nothing at all that Kabuto gives her an entirely too commiserating smile in return.

Now that she’s not moving, not rushing on to the next casualty as fast as humanly possible, the wear is catching up to her. Feeling drawn and drained, she glances around the medical tent, taking in the neat rows of beds lined up with military precision, the faintly soothing sense of medical chakra hanging in the air. There are still a few stretchers being carried in, but fresher medics are waiting, and Sakura doesn’t have to feel guilty about taking a breather. She assesses the number of medics she can see, and is relieved to find that there are only a few missing—several of them are probably in the beds themselves, from chakra exhaustion or catching an enemy attack—and the chuunin teams she sent out with them appear mostly unharmed.

“Yakushi-san!” a child’s voice calls, and Kabuto falters slightly, almost falling. Sakura doesn’t hesitate, but reaches out to grab his elbow and help haul him the rest of the way to his feet. He doesn’t thank her for it, doesn’t tear his eyes away from the trio of genin bounding towards them.

“Natsu, Aki, Makoto,” he answers, fingers already flickering green as he takes a step towards the children. “Are you hurt?”

“They’re fine,” another unfamiliar voice answers, calm and perfectly even. A tall man steps into the
tent behind the team, dark-haired and lightly tanned with golden eyes, a young woman with long blonde hair on his heels. “All of the genin are perfectly well, if tired. Stop fretting.”

Kabuto harrumphs and crosses his arms over his chest. “I'm hardly fretting, Utakata,” he answers tartly. “Just interested. Where is our illustrious leader?”

The man—who’s wearing a hitai-ate with a spiral that has six smaller curling lines, somewhere between bubbles and tentacles, surrounding it—looks politely disbelieving, but answers nevertheless. “Naruto-sama took Gaara, Haku, and his new beau to go deal with Nagato. I believe we should brace ourselves for a new addition to our ranks soon enough. Or several.”

“Gaara-sensei said we should see if you needed help,” the redheaded kunoichi genin says, pulling her twin and her other teammate forward. They look both well-accustomed to this and amusedly resigned, and Sakura feels a bit of a pang, once again, over what her own genin team could have been, if they’d been able to look past themselves.

“I can take them with me to find some food, if you need a bit of a rest, Kabuto-san,” the blonde woman offers with a bright smile. “And we can bring some back, if you're hungry.”

“Thank you, Hotaru,” Kabuto answers, rubbing a hand over his face and nearly knocking his glasses askew. He glances over at Sakura, dark eyes warily assessing, and then adds, “For Haruno-san as well, if you would. And make sure the others teams eat, too. I don’t want any of you dropping from exhaustion and cluttering up my hospital. And find that stupid aunt of mine while you're at it; she always manages to overdo things.”

Utakata snorts softly. “Koto will eat you alive if she hears you talking about her like that,” he warns, as the young woman herds the genin back out into the lightening rain.

Kabuto's face does a weird, twitching thing, almost like a spasm. “You're...on a first-name basis now?” he asks, sounding almost pained.

That gets him another perfectly polite smile, as mild as milk and as untrustworthy as the hush before a wild storm. “She insisted. Apparently saving her life merits near-adoption into the Ookami Clan, which I'm absolutely certain you never told me, Kabuto. But in case you've forgotten, that time in Iwa—”

“Haruno, this is Utakata, jinchuuriki of the Rokubi,” Kabuto interrupts with a dark look, crossing his arms over his chest and glaring at the other Uzushio nin. “Utakata, meet Haruno Sakura, apprentice to Tsunade of the Sannin.”

Utakata arches one brow, giving the grey-haired man an eloquent look, but doesn’t press. He shifts his gaze to Sakura and inclines his head politely. “Haruno-san. Thank you for all of your effort. You have healed several of my fellow Uzushio shinobi, and we are truly very grateful.”

A little self-conscious, Sakura smooths down her skirt and offers the jinchuuriki a smile. “Of course,” she answers. “You're Naruto's people.”

The man smiles at her, brighter this time, like that’s the best answer she could have possibly given.

“Why bother being a shinobi when it’s absolutely clear you're better suited as a diplomat?” Kabuto mutters, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

Utakata’s chakra flickers and flares in agitation, entirely at odds with his calm expression, and it takes Sakura a moment to realize that it’s his bijuu’s power rather than his—and the bijuu’s annoyance. She goes still, not entirely certain whether to tense and go for a weapon or ride it out and trust the
jinchuuriki.

But all Utakata does is lay a hand over his chest and take a slow, deep breath as his eyes go distant, like he’s looking at something the rest of them can’t see. The angry chakra settles and he blinks, eyes refocusing, and frowns faintly at Kabuto. “You know Saiken doesn’t appreciate people saying such things,” he chides. “And besides, you’ve met Gaara and Karin, haven’t you? If I wasn’t at least a little skilled at diplomacy, we’d eat nothing but fish, ever. The farmers and merchants would have slammed their doors in our faces years ago.”

Kabuto rolls his eyes a little, but doesn’t argue. Instead, he looks away, out at the muddy battlefield stretching away into the dim grey-green gloom. “Nagato, hmm?” he asks absently, adjusting his glasses again.

Utakata nods in confirmation. “And where Nagato goes, I have little doubt Konan will follow.”

Kabuto’s expression turns wickedly amused. “Five jinchuuriki, the Storm God, several hundred Uzumaki, a handful of shinobi clans with abilities thought lost in the city’s fall, the last of the Yuki clan, and several dozen additional overpowered shinobi including a Rinnegan user—I wonder just how many of the daimyos and village leaders are going to faint when they hear about this.”

Put like that…Sakura takes a careful breath and checks to make sure her hands aren’t shaking. That sounds…dangerous. Not so much for the other countries, because she knows Naruto, knows just how fiercely he’ll try to keep the peace, but for Uzushio. Because they were destroyed once already for being too powerful, and now they’re even more so.

“Will you…be okay?” she ventures, drawing both men’s eyes to her and making their expressions darken faintly. “Against the rest of the countries, I mean. Last time—”

“Last time, Uzushio didn’t have four jinchuuriki who were utterly loyal to their Uzukage, and another two who’d support them in a pinch,” a woman puts in, dryly amused, and Sakura turns to see the Mizukage approaching, one arm cradled against her chest, with her two slightly battered bodyguards hovering nervously behind her. Sakura moves forward, chakra already gathering as she checks Mei’s face to make sure her attention is welcome. Mei just offers her broken arm almost absently, and keeps her attention on the Uzushio nin. “And the world is in a different way than it used to be. I’m not making any promises before I can sit down and hash this all out with your Kage, but if Uzushio is looking for alliances, Kiri is close enough that it doesn’t make any sort of tactical sense for us to be at odds.”

“Especially given the fact that Kiri is entirely surrounded by water, and our Storm God has more than earned his name.” Kabuto sounds bitingly amused, and Sakura is beginning to see why Utakata is the diplomatic one here. The jinchuuriki growls, stepping forward to slap a hand over his friend’s mouth, and bows politely to the Mizukage, ignoring Kabuto’s sudden, thrashing attempts to get him off.

“Thank you, Mizukage-sama,” he offers, and Sakura is at the perfect angle to see the sharp pinch he delivers to Kabuto’s side. “If that’s the case, I look forward to the negotiations. If you’ll excuse me, I believe my companion has overexerted himself and is in need of rest.”

Mei chuckles, waving him off as Sakura releases her arm. “You may look like your father, but you’ve got your mother’s silver tongue,” she says, amused. “Next time I send a messenger, try to see that your shinobi don’t eat them. These two are still twitchy from it.”

The guard with the eye-patch splutters with greatly offended dignity, while the one with glasses goes crimson and drops his gaze to the ground, looking sheepish. Kabuto looks smug, what Sakura can
see of his face around Utakata's muffling hand as he's dragged away.

Honestly, she doesn’t blame him. Having a traditional enemy advocating for and all but promising peace is worth at least a little smugness.

Jiraiya hears the voices well before he sees those responsible.

“—not going to have **Fugaku’s son** doing—doing *that* with **my little boy**! He’s too old, and Naruto is too young! They’re—they’re more than **sixty days** apart! That’s too big a gap, right, Sarutobi-sama? It *is*.”

The sigh that earns is very, very longsuffering, but beyond that, there's no answer.

“Well, I don’t know about you,” another voice puts in, vastly amused and a little conflicted, “but I'm surprised that it even happened in the first place. I always kind of thought Arashi was more or less asexual. I mean, he had crushes, back when we were brats, but the extent of his ‘desire’ was wanting to hold hands. And he always brushed the rest of us off when we’d go out to pick up girls. Brushed us off for *training*. What else was I supposed to think?”

There's a faint snort. “Given how he managed to surround himself with some of the most beautiful, dangerous women in Uzushio—*in both* lifetimes—and is still mercifully intact, that’s probably in his favor. Shunka and Yui would have gutted him with a smile if he ever so much as looked at them inappropriately. They certainly did as much to Danzo, the first time he met them.” Sarutobi pauses thoughtfully, then hums. “Now that I think of it, perhaps that would be the best way to deal with him. I’ll have to ask Orochimaru if summoning them back is possible.”

The vaguely familiar voice laughs. “I’d forgotten about your ruthless streak, old man. Though after everything, Fishcake-sama might actually go along with it.”

“Kagami.” Sarutobi sounds weary.

“His name isn’t *Fishcake*!” Minato protests vehemently as the three resurrected shinobi round the corner of the hospital hallway. “He’s named after the hero of a very important book!” He shifts his hold on the bony form of Copy-Nin Kakashi, who’s slung limply over his shoulder, so as to better wave his arms at the dark-haired man walking on his left. “The savior of the world! Naruto! It means *maelstrom*!”

Uchiha Kagami gives him a flat look over the head of the man he and Sarutobi are carrying between them. Jiraiya recognizes those clothes, but can't quite bring himself to wonder what the leader of Akatsuki is doing not clapped in irons. Or dead. Naruto is likely involved, and that’s explanation enough.

“It also means *fishcake*,” Kagami retorts. “And if you married an Uzumaki, you knew *exactly* what you were doing him naming after a topping of their genetically predestined favorite food. Did you know that Uzushio had more ramen stalls then they did any other type of food stand? Did you know that an Uzumaki can eat roughly twice their weight in ramen in a single sitting? Because I lived there for years, and I saw it with my own eyes. And they *infected* me. I hated ramen before my family moved there, and now I *crave* it.”

Before Jiraiya can catch Minato's response—sure to be amusing, because he’s usually able to hide his latent ditz qualities, but they always manage to slip out while he’s flailing—the very pointy heel
of Tsunade's sandal stabs into his instep, and he straightens up with a yelp, saving the basin of water he’s holding from spilling at the very last moment.

“Pay attention,” Tsunade growls at him, and Jiraiya winces, but it’s too late. The three sets of footsteps have come to a complete halt a few yards away, and he can feel them staring. With as much dignity as he has left—not much, at this point—he reaches up and adjusts the cute little hat Tsunade had gleefully slapped onto his head as she claimed her winnings.

And, now that he thinks of it, he’s going to have words with her about what she gets up to in private if she’s got one of these things lying around in his size.

Minato makes a horrified choking noise, and then garbles, “I…I think I need to sit down. Oh, my head.”

From the other side of the patient’s bed, Orochimaru looks up, arching a coolly derisive brow before he returns to wrapping a few shallower cuts. His hair is up in a high tail, turning his face into something almost eerily androgynous, and the little white nurse’s cap really doesn’t help. He looks envitably unruffled in the face of entirely too-short dresses and too much pink, but then again, the bastard has never particularly cared about playing a kunoichi when the mission requires it. And in this case, Tsunade insisted.

Jiraiya just knows this has to be payback for when he got her and Orochimaru into maid costumes, that one glorious time he won their bet.

“Your head? My eyes,” Kagami disagrees, choked and wounded, his voice full of mental agony. “Agh, my eyes. I’ve got the Sharingan, you twisted, perverted asshole. I’m never going to be able to un-see this.”

Maybe it’s petty, but Jiraiya is more than content with the idea of someone else sharing his pain.

Tsunade, bless her sadistic, wicked heart, is entirely unmoved by this display of dramatics. She straightens, waves a dazed-looking chuunin forward to take her patient, and turns to the newcomers. “Who here is wounded?” she asks, planting her hands on her hips and surveying the six shinobi narrowly.

Kagami immediately raises his hand, clamping his eyes shut and waving at Jiraiya almost desperately. “I’m mentally scarred,” he insists. “Please, it’s causing trauma with its mere presence. Make it go away.”

“Hey!” Jiraiya protests, stiffening, because if he has to wear this damned thing he’s going to own it. “I’d like to see you pull off a nurse’s outfit with this much panache!”

Orochimaru makes a low sound of entirely evil amusement. “I don’t think that word means quite what you think it means, Jiraiya,” he says, then studies the group. “Tsunade, Itachi has a debilitating and likely fatal cough that I’ve found is resistant to every treatment I tried. Perhaps you will have more luck, given our…divergent skillsets.”

Minato does a truly comical double take. “Orochimaru?” he squeaks, eyes widening to an honestly rather worrying size. Then he blanches to a pale green and seems to grow a bit faint, if that swaying is anything to go by.

If only Kushina could see him now, Jiraiya thinks a little wistfully. She never did quite let up on the “unreliable ditzy pretty boy” thing, and she’d get so much glee out of this situation. Granted, a good portion of it would be at Jiraiya’s expense, but Jiraiya feels it would be entirely worth if for the
mocking it would earn Minato.

Sarutobi just sighs aggrievedly at all of them, though he directs a particularly stern look at an unrepentant Tsunade, and says dryly, “Kakashi is unconscious and has remained that way for the last thirty minutes. Obito is…coming off the aftereffects of Sharingan-induced behavioral modification. I'm not entirely certain what we should be looking for in his case, and the only Uchiha who could have told us is long since dead, I'm afraid.”

Tsunade's lips tighten faintly, and she steps to the side, nudging Jiraiya out of the way as she does so. “Kakashi here. The other one can go there. If they're not dying right this moment, they can wait. Uchiha, since you are dying and we need you alive long enough to turn in your report on the last twelve years, Examining Room 67. Jiraiya, Orochimaru, you'll be helping.” She strides towards the door, only pausing to press a soft kiss to Sarutobi's forehead as she passes. He smiles back at her and pats her shoulder, and then moves with Kagami to deposit the man they're carrying on the second bed.

Jiraiya takes one look at Minato's pale face, rolls his eyes, and pulls Kakashi out of his loose hold. “Go find your son,” he tells the man, not ungerently. “We'll survive without you for the next hour or so, and I'm sure Naruto would like to spend a bit of time with his father.”

Minato smiles faintly at that, rubbing a hand through his blond hair. “I—he’s the Uzukage now, Sensei,” he says softly, with an aching sort of pride in his voice. “I was there when he was born, and now he’s a Kage. He’s befriended the Kyuubi and defeated Akatsuki. Isn’t that amazing?”

That is…surprising, but at the same time entirely expected. Jiraiya smiles, too, remembering the brilliant knucklehead he dragged along with him to look for Tsunade, the boy who wouldn't give up no matter what and regardless of the odds. Yeah, that sounds like exactly the kind of person who could rebuild Uzushio from a ruin.

“Even the strongest man still needs a father sometimes,” Jiraiya reminds his student quietly, clapping him gently on the shoulder. “And I bet Naruto needs you more than most, with the life he’s had. Go on, kid. I know you want to.”

Minato shakes himself, then gives Jiraiya the same brilliant grin his son inherited and vanishes in a flash of yellow light.

Obito comes awake with his head aching hollowly and silence all around him, the smell of disinfectant sharp in his nose and a familiar presence hovering over him. He sighs and turns his head, feeling the smooth cloth of the pillowcase sliding over his scars, but doesn’t open his eyes. He… doesn’t want to. Doesn’t want to face what he’ll have to face once he does.

There's a long moment of complete stillness, and then movement. Obito tracks it, and doesn’t let himself react when deft fingers curl around his wrist, lifting his hand from the mattress and running a thumb over his palm. Kakashi doesn’t say anything, but Obito finally gives in and opens his eyes, finding the Copy-Nin seated directly in his line of sight.

“…Damn,” Obito says after a moment. “I kind of was hoping to catch you crying.”

Kakashi looks back at him, hitai-ate tilted up to leave both eyes visible, and that’s…a shock. Startling and a little unnerving, to see the eye he gave Kakashi from this close up. His eye, which is the reason
for Kakashi's reputation, for his standing as one of the strongest shinobi in the world.

And Obito took the same eye and murdered thousands.

“There's only one crybaby in this room, Obito, and it’s not me,” Kakashi parries, like it’s instinct, like they haven’t spent the last twenty-odd years with a world between them. And, as though Kakashi recognizes that, too, his grip on Obito's hand tightens, and he drops his gaze to it. The skin is about three shades paler than even Obito's Uchiha-white skin, and has the faintest greenish tinge that’s usually invisible, but which shows up clearly in the hospital’s unflattering light. Obito kind of wants to wrench it away, hide it under the blankets, but at the same time, he can't quite force himself to do so.

Kakashi is touching him. His hands are warm.

It’s been…a very, very long time since Obito felt that kind of skin-warmth. Since he felt any sort of touch at all, really.

“How are you?” Kakashi asks, low and intent, and that’s enough to make Obito close his eyes again.

“I'm...fine,” he manages after a moment, and when Kakashi makes a noise of quiet disbelief opens one eye to glare at him. “It’s the truth,” he insists, pushing himself up to lean back against the pillows. Even that small bit of exertion leaves him feeling weak and unsteady. “But if you're asking about my intentions…”

Kakashi snorts. “I was asking how you are,” he insists.

Maybe it’s even true. Gods know Kakashi has always been an unpredictable bastard. Obito sighs and rubs at his scars, a habit he’s never quite managed to break. “…Weak,” he admits at last. “I think it’s…I've stopped hating, and that’s what kept me going for so long. Now I'm just—empty. It’s going to take some time to get used to that.”

“And your intentions?” Kakashi prompts, eyes crinkling in a secretive, laughing smile, and Obito has to pause, just for a moment, because that’s an expression he’s never seen on Kakashi's face before. Not ever.

He swallows, but forces himself to look away with a hollow laugh. “Don’t worry, Kotoamatsukami is unbreakable,” he answers bleakly, then reaches up to tap his temple. “I know I can't attack Konoha, that I'm loyal and my way of going about things was wrong.” Then he taps his chest, the hole where Sasuke stabbed him neatly healed without so much as a mark. “It just…hasn’t quite sunk in yet in here.”

It’s frustrating, because Obito thinks of his goal, and wants it, but he knows down to his bones that he won’t pursue it any more. And maybe someday he’ll come to terms with that, but for right now it’s a strange and almost painful divide.

But…what his father—and he has a father, or had one, a father who loved him and wanted the best for him and probably hates him now—what his father had said is entirely true. What Kakashi said is true. He wants Rin to greet him with a smile when he dies. He wants her to call him by name, and know who he is, and not turn away from him because of what he’s done. And maybe she will, because of those he’s killed, the lives he’s ruined, but…maybe she won’t.

And right now, like this, Obito thinks he might someday have a chance of meeting her eyes again.

Intellectually, he knows that Kotoamatsukami is a very large part of his easy acceptance of these thoughts, but he doesn’t care. Can't care, doesn’t want to, and won't even try to fight Shisui’s power.
This is who he is now, broken and battered and fallen, and he’s accepted that.

When he looks up, Kakashi is watching him again, expression unreadable behind the mask and eyes thoughtful, considering. “You're leaving,” he says bluntly.

Obito considers misleading him, or twisting the truth until Kakashi drops the subject, but he’s tired of lying. He has been for years now, and isn’t that the greatest irony in the world? He, who wanted to build a perfectly truthful world where lies didn’t exist, laid all the groundwork without ever speaking a single truth to anyone.

“Yes,” he admits at length. “I just—I can't stay here. Kotoamatsukami might have started the process, but I still have to sort out everything in my head, and if I stay here it’s going to tear me apart.” He remembers Kakashi's words to him in Kamui, remembers the offer, strange and startling and unasked-for, to come with him, to help spread a true peace across the world, but he doesn’t mention it. Maybe it was a lie, or a desperate attempt to reach him, and Obito certainly isn’t about to hold Kakashi to it.

But Kakashi doesn’t even hesitate to ask, “Want some company?”

Obito's hand clenches, fingers going tight, and it’s entirely a coincidence that he just so happens to be clutching Kakashi’s hand in his. Happenstance.

He doesn’t answer, but Kakashi meets his eyes, and that’s answer enough.

Tsunade's bellow of anger, upon returning to find two empty beds and a conveniently open window, is enough to shake the hospital right down to its foundations.

“That lazy, perverted bastard!” she snarls, slamming a fist into the wall and leaving a crater the size of a respectable boulder. “When I get my hands on him I’m going to wring his scrawny, ungrateful neck!”

“Oh, hey, he left a note.” Jiraiya prudently snatches up the small scrap of paper before Tsunade can grab it and tear it into teeny, tiny pieces. He reads the hastily scrawled words, then winces and begins to edge backward. “Um, oops, never mind. Just a scrap—eek!”

Tsunade withdraws her fist from the second crater in the wall—this time threateningly close to Jiraiya's skull—plucks the paper from his hand, and reads what it says.

Got lost on the road of life. Will return eventually. Have Iruka-sensei take care of Mr. Ukki for me.

Jiraiya sees his chance and bolts for safety.

(It might have even worked, if not for his high heels.)
Finale: Coda (Cadence for a Storm in Closing)

Chapter Notes

I'M ALIVE. NO REALLY. IT'S NOT A LIE, I PROMISE.

(All those minions I was excited about? Yeah, apparently in minion-speak ‘ask me if you have any questions about the system at all’ translates to ‘please end the world as we know it by crashing our entire archival system so completely that it erases eighteen months of data and the tech guys legitimately break down crying when they see it.’ Akfjsdgkj *is ded*)

Epilogue will be up shortly. I mean it this time. Pinky swear.

[Coda: A passage that brings a piece or a movement to an end.

Cadence: A melodic or harmonic configuration that creates a sense of sense of resolution, indicating the end of a section or a piece.]

Jiraiya's feet are aching, even though he discarded Tsunade's stupid torture-shoes as soon as he sat down. He pulls one into his lap and rubs at the arch absently, distantly wondering just how she manages to stay on her feet for eighteen hours a day while wearing those things. Granted, hers are significantly shorter than the ones she forced him and Orochimaru into, but still. Torture.

The shoes only hold a very small portion of his attention, though. The rest is centered firmly on the hospital bed in front of him, the pale, gaunt body of his former student laid out on the pale sheets. Nagato’s red hair is like a spill of blood across the pillowcase, and the sight of him is absolutely unnerving. Jiraiya had thought him dead, right up until Orochimaru revealed that he was still alive and the puppet-leader of Akatsuki. And he wonders, now, just how much of Nagato’s situation is his fault, how much can be attributed to him leaving three young children on their own in a war zone.

Nagato isn’t the wasted near-corpse he was when Naruto dragged him back to the village in his automated walker, repentant and prepared to die to pay for his crimes. Tsunade was able to counteract the damage caused by the Demonic Statue of the Outer Path through a transfer of chakra from several of the jinchuuriki. He’s Nagato again, rather than a somewhat lively zombie, and while seeing him like this eases Jiraiya's mind slightly, he’s still reeling. More so than when he first learned of his students’ fall from grace, even, because that was distant knowledge, and this is… understanding. This is proof that something went wrong despite Jiraiya's best intentions.

He should have dragged the three kids back to Konoha with him. He should have insisted, no matter how much he knew Yahiko wanted to save Ame. Even if it would have put them closer to Danzo—who aided Hanzō, and the thought still makes Jiraiya's blood boil with impotent fury—it would have taken them out of his line of fire, would have kept them relatively safe, and prevented…this. All of this, likely, or enough of it to count.
But Nagato has seen the error of his ways, helped along greatly by Naruto's unwavering conviction that peace is truly possible. He hasn’t even been punished, because he’s an Uzumaki and Naruto immediately claimed him as a clan member and citizen of Uzushio, and he’s here, in the hospital, sleeping peacefully. Konan is in the next bed over, equally out of it, and she looks like a vast weight has been lifted from her shoulders, as though she’s just regained hope in the world.

The Naruto effect, Tsunade had called it, and her tone was light but the look in her eyes was absolutely serious. Jiraiya can't help but agree.

There's no flicker in the shadows, no sound of steps or anything of the sort, but Jiraiya still has instincts honed over two years of close contact and four more of slightly more irregular meetings, so he doesn’t jump out of his skin when his sneaky little bastard of a student spontaneously appears three inches to the left of his elbow.

“Sasuke,” he says, and can't quite fight his faint smile at the sight of the Uchiha. He never expected to do anything but hate the boy, when they first met. Hate him and reluctantly train him, give him the bare minimum that Jiraiya could get away with, but—well. He’s become grudgingly fond of the kid, with his pigheadedness and his single-minded devotion to Naruto and his deeply buried sense of humor. Training him has been...good. Satisfying. And if he’s not another Minato, not Naruto with his strange sideways sort of genius, that’s probably for the better. Jiraiya knows his own flaws, and at least with Sasuke, he was never able to project his feelings for anyone else onto the boy, the way he likely would have done if Naruto kept training with him. Naruto is the spitting image of his father, after all.

“Ero-Sennin,” Sasuke answers, the faint tip to one corner of his mouth that speaks of amusement. Probably at Jiraiya's eternal aggravation regarding that nickname, knowing him. Or—

“Nice dress.”

That.

(The only upside to the fact that he has to wear the stupid thing for a solid twelve hours is he’s made very, very sure no one has been able to get pictures, and Tsunade's let him remain mostly in the hospital, so only a fairly small pool of people have seen him. Unlike Orochimaru, who has quite calmly accompanied Tsunade all around the village in her duties. Then again, the only looks Orochimaru gets are because he looks like a girl in a very short skirt, whereas for Jiraiya, those looks are significantly more...horrified. He’d hold this over Orochimaru’s head forever, except that in case it actually works in the snaky bastard’s favor.)

Jiraiya chuckles despite himself, tugging at one ruffled hem. “Orochimaru and I lost a bet. Tsunade's viciousness knows no bounds,” he explains. Another pause, his eyes still fixed on Nagato’s still form, and then he offers lightly, “So you and Naruto, huh? Minato cornered you yet?”

The barely-visible smirk deepens, becoming blatant. “He’s currently attempting to convince Naruto that I'm too old for him,” he says in clear amusement. “When I left, Naruto was in the process of reminding his father that he could technically be considered in his sixties, given his memories.”

Jiraiya wishes Minato luck, though he already knows Naruto won't so much as budge. The brat has his mother’s stubbornness, and it’s only been tempered living among so many other Uzumaki. “Talked to Tsunade yet?” he asks, switching to rub at his other foot.

He’s familiar enough with both his student and his former teammate to recognize the slightly abashed expression that flickers over Sasuke's features. Then again, it’s a pretty common one when directed at Jiraiya, and can roughly be translated as ‘the Hokage scares me, won't you please be my meat-
shield and bring the topic up with her for me instead?’ He gives Sasuke a scowl, because no, and gets a flatly entreating expression in return.

“We have a month,” Sasuke points out when the silence gets too accusing for him to withstand any longer, and he’s not quite fidgeting, but it’s definitely close. “The Chuunin Exams haven’t even started yet.”

And Sasuke, who Tsunade has always enjoyed picking on—in no small part because he and Jiraiya can so easily get a rise out of each other—will obviously put it off until the very last moment, and then Tsunade will refuse on principle. Jiraiya sighs and rubs a hand over his hair, giving in with bad grace and a roll of his eyes. “Fine, fine, I’ll do it. But you’re going to owe me one, kid. Or several dozen.”

Sasuke nods his quick acceptance of this, then turns to head for the window. A single step away, he pauses, and then says gruffly, “Thanks.”

For everything, is the part he leaves unspoken, but Jiraiya hears it anyway.

“Keep in contact,” is his only acknowledgement. They’re both happier that way. “And the next time you try and sneak up on me like that, I’ll drown you in a puddle, got it, brat?”

The bastard just grunts something that could be a sound of amusement, a vague threat, or simple recognition of someone else having spoken, and then is gone. Jiraiya narrows his eyes after him, because he’s been around long enough to know when the brat is planning something, and has been on the receiving end of enough of Sasuke’s Naruto-inspired pranks to know when he should be wary. And he’s definitely getting that feeling right now, which is very much not good.

But still, if Sasuke is going to end up where he thinks Sasuke is going to end up, he won’t have to worry about it for that much longer.

Jiraiya smiles a little as he turns back to his first student, watching Nagato breathe deeply and evenly, and puts it out of mind. This isn’t a night for worrying, after all. Tomorrow will be soon enough for that.

Sasuke turns back a few yards from the hospital, no longer bothering to fight his smirk, and studies the life-sized photograph pinned to the wall of the nearest building. Pink and ruffles and a perilously short skirt, a nurse’s cap perched atop shaggy white hair, and the image is scarring but it’s sheer gold as far as mortification goes. He pats it with an evil chuckle, casts his gaze over the hundreds of copies in various sizes pasted all across Konoha, and heads off with a quiet snicker and a song in his heart. His work here is most definitely done.

Let the old pervert just try to use him as kunoichi bathhouse bait ever again. This time, Sasuke gets the last laugh.

The wind is rising, making the treetops dance and sway as the moon sails between tattered clouds overhead. Stars are coming out, and the air is cooling rapidly without the dense cloud cover of the past week. Konoha is quiet under its blanket of collective exhaustion, and the few people Naruto has
passed on the streets have all looked as though they're headed to bed.

They won, and the cost was dear, but nowhere near what it could have been. Only a handful of casualties, given the powers present on the battlefield, and Naruto mourns those lost, of course, but Uzushio's fall is foremost in his memories. In comparison to that, the last large battle he took part in, this one was an overwhelming victory.

Naruto tips his head back, watching the slow movement of the clouds above, and breathes out slowly. He's finally shaken his father, who has been persistently tailing him for the last hour with various (mostly petulant) arguments as to why Fugaku's son isn’t someone he should be dating. Honestly, it’s more amusing than anything, especially since Naruto is well aware that Namikaze Minato, Konoha's fearsome Yellow Flash and Yondaime Hokage, would be more than capable of pulling up a better argument than “But—but his haircut is stupid!” if he truly objected. He’s just… being a father.

No one’s ever done that for Naruto before, and he’s finding that there's rather a lot he’s willing to put up with for the sake of that.

But he’s alone for the moment, and that’s fine. Sarutobi is at the Memorial, saying his goodbyes to all the family and friends he’s lost. Kagami is gone, having cheerfully abandoned the village to follow his son—who has apparently, as far as Naruto can gather, eloped with Kakashi. Hashirama and Tobirama are both with Tsunade, walking the village one more time. Haku, Gaara, Killer B, and Utakata have ensconced themselves in an inn with the rest of Uzushio’s genin teams and jounin sensei while Fū and Yugito and their new kunoichi friends hit the baths. Karin—with Roushi’s assistance—escorted the rest of the Uzushio nin back to the city once she was satisfied that Naruto wasn’t about to cause another World War. It’s likely she’ll depose Kimimaro before the night is through, and have Uzushio running like a well-oiled (if slightly off-kilter) machine by the time he makes it back.

It’s amazing, having them all here. Having his past and his present meet and then clearly thrive, and there doesn’t seem to be a way to separate them any longer, even if Naruto wanted to. The Whirlpool shinobi have mixed with the Leaf, and struck up fast friendships, just as they did in the past. It makes something warm settle in Naruto's bones, to see Fū and Tenten joined at the hip, or Shizune and Utakata commiserating as they walk, or Gaara surrounded by a knot of genin from both villages.

The past isn’t repeating itself, not exactly. This isn’t quite how it used to be. There's no overwhelming tension now, no breathless sort of danger that speaks of war on the horizon. It was a little touch and go, earlier, when A descended on Konoha like a particularly indignant thunderstorm and demanded to know where his brother was. But it’s better now, and the Raikage brought several genin teams with him to enter in the Exam. Tsunade has even sent Ōnoki an invitation to participate in either the Exams or their impromptu Summit, despite the tension between their villages, and it feels like…peace. Like a start, and that’s enough. That’s the first step.

A breath of sea-wind in the darkness, sharp with salt and carrying the heat of sun-warmed golden stone, and Naruto pauses, breathing it in with a smile. He closes his eyes, and Uzushio hums around him like a second skin, an aura of home and dear and mine, always and peace, finally. She feels content, the way she did that first night the city was whole, the construction finished and her people sleeping soundly within her strong walls. It’s a good feeling, so good, like a warm fire after a long day in the cold, a hearty meal with family for an empty stomach. Like a hug after a long absence, or a soft kiss for no reason at all.

“We did it,” Naruto tells her softly, and feels Kurama add a sleepy, relaxed agreement from deep within him. “It’s over, finally. We did it.”
Awake, alive, she agrees, sweet and warm in his ear, and just for a heartbeat he sees Uzushio as she is, spread out in shades of red and white and gold beneath the moon, a thousand hearts beating peacefully within. Sees the ocean, cool and gentle, washing up along the shore. Walls and watchtowers, like bones and skin, streets like veins and people like blood, and beneath it all her heart, fierce and beautiful, carved with the names of every family she calls her own.

Awake, living, the both of us. The city is alive and the people are returned, and your soul dwells here.

Thank you, child. I called you back, and you came.

Naruto remembers death, remembers a knife at his throat and darkness closing in around him. But her touch is peace and joy, comfort and ease, and Naruto allows himself to forget about war and sorrow and death, to push them aside because they’re not important anymore, not relevant now with the way their world is changing. He closes his eyes, cradled by the sea-wind from his home and Uzushio's heart beating away alongside his own, and thinks of happy times, Haku and Gaara and Sasuke, red rooftops and white stone and golden-brown streets beneath the sun, storms rising above the sea and immense in their power. People and moments and sights that will always be with him, always held close to his soul, because they're so very precious to him. His reason for existing. For returning.

Always, he promises with a smile, and it’s the easiest thing he’s ever done. I’ll always come back to you. How could I ever do differently?

It is our promise, Uzushio agrees, and lets him go in a swirl of sea-wind and laughter and the trembling, awe-inspiring power of a storm tightly leashed. And Naruto laughs along with her, stepping forward, and it feels like entwined fingers gently pulling apart, but right there to grasp if he needs them. Always there, no matter what, so warm and gentle and welcoming, and this is home. This is everything Naruto has ever wanted, all he’s ever worked for. Home and safety and family and peace, and maybe it isn’t perfect, maybe it won’t ever be, but it’s enough. It’s enough, and he loves it fiercely, ferociously, with all that he is.

There’s only one promise left to honor, made to Mito on the night he became Uzukage the first time, and Naruto grins as he heads down the street, because it’s already halfway to fulfilled.

And that’s a damned good start.

The lights are still on in Sasuke’s apartment when he slips in through the window, and Sasuke himself is leaning against the kitchen doorway, a mug of green tea cradled between his hands. He’s watching Naruto, expression calm and faintly tired, but alert, and when Naruto smiles at him he smiles back and sets his tea aside, crossing the floor with three swift steps.

“Finally got away?” he asks dryly, reaching out, and Naruto laughs, taking his hand and allowing Sasuke to pull him in close.

“The Pervert-Sage nabbed him,” he admits. “I think he noticed how close I was to simply stringing Dad up in a tree or something just to shake him off.”

Sasuke snorts softly, leaning in, and Naruto leans up to meet him in a soft, slow kiss, sliding his fingers into dark hair and gripping gently. The Uchiha makes a low, rough sound, arms tightening
around him and fingers grasping, and Naruto nips at his lower lip and licks into his mouth, the slow slide of fingers along his sides sending heat curling pleasantly through him. Another kiss, slick and deep and messy but all the better for it, and Naruto laughs as he pulls away slightly. Sasuke makes a dissatisfied noise, pressing his mouth to the skin of Naruto's throat and scraping lightly with his teeth, and Naruto's eyes fall shut as the curling heat becomes a flood of sparks down his spine.

But it’s still not enough to entirely distract him from what he wants to say, and he uses his grip on Sasuke's hair to gently pull his head up so their eyes can meet.

He’s been practicing for this all day, planning his words and his tone and a way to couch it that’s both cool and nonchalant, but in the end, with those hot-dark eyes on him and every emotion written clearly on Sasuke's face, all of that vanishes like so much smoke. Naruto's breath catches in his throat, his heart heavy-hot in his chest, and all that he can manage to say is, “Come with me. When I go back to Uzushio, come with me.”

And Sasuke smiles, not small and slight and half-smirking, but full and warm and traced with laughter as he steps backward, pulling Naruto right along with him. “Of course, dobe,” he says, as though there was never a question, and maybe there wasn’t. “Jiraiya's going to ask Tsunade to make me ambassador.”

A surge of elation, like a storm touching down to earth, like a whirlpool to sweep him up in joy and warmth and yesyesyes, and Naruto laughs and leaps at Sasuke, tackles him right to the floor and kisses him hard, wraps his arms around him tightly, because he could have survived, with Sasuke in Konoha and him in Uzushio. He could have endured, but he doesn’t have to, because Sasuke is coming home with him. Sasuke laughs too, wrapping his arms around him again and rolling them over, pinning Naruto to the floor and returning the kiss with interest, tongues and heat and silver-bright sparks of want behind Naruto's eyes.

“Spend the night,” Sasuke says, low and intent, and Naruto knows this won't just be sharing a bed. This is everything, and he wants.

“Yes,” he agrees, caught halfway between laughter and breathlessness, and Sasuke kisses him again, like relief, like thankfulness even though Naruto can't imagine how he had any doubts at all. “Bedroom,” he reminds Sasuke, who makes another dissatisfied noise, as though moving goes against everything in him at the moment. Naruto laughs at him, wriggling out from underneath him even as Sasuke tries to pin him again, but Naruto is too fast and makes it to his feet before Sasuke can get a good grip.

With a low huff, Sasuke rises, too, eyes narrowing, and Naruto raises a brow in mocking challenge. Sasuke growls and lunges, and he’s fast but Naruto manages to turn at the last moment, kanzashi chiming brightly as he ducks away. He takes three steps back, and then has to dart aside again as Sasuke's next attempt brings him close enough for his fingertips to skim sea-blue cloth. Sasuke goes tumbling past with a noise of nearly offended surprise, and Naruto laughs before he can help it, dancing away from an affronted kick until he’s at the edge of the hallway.

Rising to his feet again, Sasuke narrows his eyes, studying Naruto closely. “Those bells,” he says, realization beginning to dawn.

Naruto grins back at him smugly and tips his head, making the kanzashi chime again. “You mean these?” he says with false innocence. “What about them?”

Sasuke is staring at him, and Naruto can all but see him adding up the number of times Danzo missed him so narrowly, or Obito did, remembering how Naruto came out of both fights almost unscathed, even with the bells announcing every movement as he made it. He can see when Sasuke makes the
connection, his eyes going wide and then narrowing sharply again in sudden understanding.

“They're off,” he says in disbelief. “They chime after you move, not as.”

Grin widening, Naruto reaches up and pulls them out, letting his hair fall loose around his face as he flips one around his fingers and then tosses it over. Sasuke catches it and turns it around, studying the tiny, inconspicuous seals laid into the glossy wood. “An Uzushio special,” Naruto affirms impishly. “Uzumaki Mio was the best at what she did. And she was a shinobi. Believe me, those aren’t just pretty sticks. People don’t even realize they’re listening to the bells most of the time, and it throws their attacks off. Brilliant, right?”

“Dead last, I don’t know whether to be impressed or accuse you of cheating,” Sasuke says, incredulity coloring his tone, but when he looks up again there's humor in his eyes.

“Uzukage,” Naruto insists, affronted, and chucks the other kanzashi at his boyfriend in mild irritation. “I am the Uzukage, teme, you can't call me that anymore.”

“Hn.” But Sasuke is laughing at him, if silently, and he catches the ornament before it can stab him and lays both carefully on the low table in front of the couch. When he looks up again, the humor has shifted into heat, and Naruto finds it suddenly hard to breathe.

“Bedroom,” Sasuke says lowly, and Naruto drags his brain cells back together, gives Sasuke the cheesiest grin he can manage, and bolts down the hall. There's a grunt from behind him, and then Sasuke all but tackles him though the doorway. Only just managing to stay on his feet, Naruto shifts with the momentum, braces himself, and ducks. With an indignant noise, Sasuke is flipped right over his head, and lands with a huff in the middle of the mattress. For a brief moment, Naruto thinks it's a victory, but then a sharp yank on his obi has him tumbling right along after Sasuke and landing on top of him with a yelp. Sasuke helpfully smothers him with a pillow as he attempts to get away.

“I give, I give!” Naruto chokes out, batting Sasuke's hands away and half-sprawling over the other man, trying halfheartedly to pin his arms down. He can't quite resist stealing another kiss, though, with Sasuke so close, and Sasuke answers him readily, pressing up against him and wrapping long blond strands around his fingers. An edge of teeth makes Naruto groan, and then another hand is pulling at his obi, tugging it away. Happily, Naruto does the same, pushing Sasuke's tank top up and trying to tug his loose drawstring pants down even though he's lying on them.

There's a pointed tug on his fishnet shirt and Sasuke grunts, “Off,” with enough irritation to make Naruto laugh against his lips before he pulls away, sitting up and pulling off layers.

“Same to you,” he returns breathlessly, wriggling out of his tights, and Sasuke strips with alacrity, tossing first his shirt and then his pants to the side. Naruto barely has half a second to stare at pale skin and lean muscle before Sasuke reaches for him again, and Naruto can't resist. He catches Sasuke's hand, lets the Uchiha pull him in close until he’s all but in Sasuke's lap, and the kiss this time is even hotter, intensified by the touch of bare flesh and warm skin.

Naruto is still smiling, can't stop and doesn’t want to even as Sasuke shifts back to lean against the headboard, and Naruto moves with him, knees falling on either side of Sasuke's hips. It steals his breath, catches it somewhere down in his chest and makes the heat rise higher as he stares down at Sasuke, and Sasuke looks right back up at him. Everything is in his eyes, overwhelming and just enough, and Naruto kisses him again, wet-hot and desperate, because he has never, ever wanted anyone with even a fraction of this intensity.

“Done this before?” Sasuke asks, a rough and breathless question barely given time to register before he drags a hand down Naruto's back, tracing the curve of his spine beneath his skin. It feels like fire,
It takes a moment to understand the question, but when it finally untangles itself from the
heatwantyes that’s filling his mind, Naruto manages a nod. “Once, with Gaara,” he says, and
something flickers in Sasuke's eyes. Naruto offers him a brief, wry smile, and explains, “We…
wanted to make sure we could control ourselves, if we had sex. The bijuu were our partners by then,
but it’s still a lot of chakra to manage, and…we just didn’t want to hurt anyone. Not—not like that.
And trying it together was safe.” A breath, a swallow, and Naruto manages, “And you?”

Sasuke's features soften, and he kisses Naruto again, warmer and deeper, arms curling tight around
his waist. Naruto wraps his arms around Sasuke's neck and shoulders and hangs on in return. “Yes,”
Sasuke murmurs, “but only ever for a single night. Nothing more.”

They weren't you, he doesn’t have to say, because they’re both thinking it equally.

Inhale, exhalation, and Naruto offers up a grin, warm and bright and enough to pull them back into
the present. “Like this?” he suggests, rolling his hips slowly and making Sasuke choke out a groan.

“You're going to kill me,” Sasuke huffs, even as he clutches Naruto closer to him, digs fingertips into
his skin in ten sharp-sweet points meant to steal his coherency.

Naruto laughs as much as he can around the warm, expansive tightness in his chest. “Nah,” he says
cheerfully, rolling his hips again. “I kinda think I want to keep you around.”

Sasuke's eyes are full of humor, even as he trails his fingers down over Naruto's ass and brushes
across his entrance, making his eyes fall shut. “Mm,” he hums against Naruto's collarbone, scraping
it gently with his teeth. “A sex slave chained to your bed all day? I think I could live with that.”

With a fox-sly grin, Naruto pushes Sasuke back a little and leans away, arching his spine and making
Sasuke's face darken with lust as their cocks rub together. “Me too,” he agrees wickedly, tracing his
hands over Sasuke's chest and scraping lightly with his nails. Sasuke moans, head tipping back
against the wood, and Naruto leans in to mouth at one of his nipples, pulling a sharp hiss from him.

“Got any slick?” he asks against Sasuke's skin, sucking a mark onto the pale chest.

“Bastard,” Sasuke huffs, winding Naruto's hair around his fingers again, but the only heat behind it is
desire. “Bedside table, drawer, on the left.”

Naruto finds it easily, and straightens up as he snaps the lid open. “Hand,” he orders, ducking down
to kiss Sasuke, nipping at his lip and then sliding their tongues together. Sasuke obeys with a sharp
breath, letting Naruto cover his fingers with the gel and immediately moving his hand down to press
against Naruto's hole. Naruto groans, eyes fluttering shut again as the first finger slides in, and he tips
his head back, leaving Sasuke to trace the line of his throat with his mouth, breath hot against his
skin.

It’s been over a year since he’s done this, and he’d forgotten how it felt, odd but good, messy and
intimate. Another finger, and he sighs, shifting his hips to adjust as Sasuke scissors his fingers and
rubs against the muscle, coaxing it to stretch. Little bits of pleasure spark up his spine, curl in his gut
and stoke the heat higher, wind through him like wires tightening, and he wants. Wants Sasuke, any
way he can have him, for as long as he can have him, and if he has any say in it that will be forever.
And this is one piece of that need, but encompasses so much more, leaves him dizzy with desire until
he can hardly breathe.

Another finger, a sharper stretch, but it’s still amazing. Another kiss, glancing and clumsy because
they both want so much right now, and Naruto leans in more, rubs their cheeks together and then
gently closes his teeth around one of Sasuke's earlobes, tugging carefully. Sasuke gasps, fingers jerking, and hits a cluster of nerves that makes Naruto cry out, breathless and on edge, like a spring wound tight. He clumsily grabs for the lube again, dumps some carelessly on his hand and reaches for Sasuke's cock, covers him quickly even as he hisses and jerks, and orders, “Now, Sasuke, damn it, I want—”

Sasuke slides into him, just fast enough to steal all words and breath right from his throat, seats himself deep with a drawn-out groan and tips his head back to thump against the wood. His fingers clench around Naruto's sides, almost like a spasm, and his hips twitch upward in a short, helpless jerk that makes Naruto gasp. Naruto tips forward, pressing his forehead to Sasuke's shoulder as he tries to regain even a shred of his control.

In his ear, Sasuke's breath comes in pants, and his eyes are tightly shut. It makes Naruto's heart flutter and twist, to see him so clearly undone, and he rolls his hips, feeling the hardness inside him, the stretch and fullness that's like nothing else. Sasuke gasps, thrusts up, and Naruto does it again, riding the rise of Sasuke's body and using it, lifting up and sliding back down. He isn't going to last long, is almost at the edge already, but that’s fine, because they're going to get other chances, other times to make it last. He rocks again, lifting, letting Sasuke's thrusts help him move, and it's heat and closeness and Sasuke's moans against his skin, arms around him and hands grasping and his own cries in the low light. It’s fireworks up his spine, nerves alight and body humming, desire and want and need winding themselves tighter and tighter around them until it all breaks with a sharp wrench and Naruto is coming, body shaking in Sasuke's hold. Another thrust, a choked-off moan and Sasuke follows him, face pressed into his shoulder and body jerking helplessly as he spends himself.

Undone, Naruto thinks, barely able to manage even that, and turns his head to press a messy, open-mouthed kiss against Sasuke’s temple. He gathers himself for a long moment, then rises up on his knees, groaning when Sasuke slides out of him, and drops bonelessly to the side. A second later Sasuke follows him, sliding down the mattress and sprawling out on his back, eyes fluttering closed even as he reaches for Naruto. Naruto smiles, exhaustion weighing on him as he shifts, tipping himself into Sasuke's arms and letting himself be pulled close, halfway draped over Sasuke's chest.

Sasuke whispers something into the warm darkness, arms winding just a touch tighter. Naruto smiles, kisses his shoulder, and murmurs, “Yeah. Me too.”

The day is bright, the sky completely clear for the first time in over a week, and the warmth rises from the damp earth to fill the air with the smell of wet summer. Naruto stands on a balcony overlooking the square with the rest of the Kage and village leaders, hands braced on the warm stone railing in front of him as he looks out over the gathered shinobi. The genin teams are in the first row, assembled with their jounin instructors behind them, and each of them stands tall and proud, chins lifted. The rest are behind them, shinobi from all of the major countries and several of the smaller ones, standing in formation and staring upwards to where their leaders are waiting.

The grey-and-blue formal robes are heavy, but it’s a good weight, meaningful. Naruto tips his head a little, scanning his own forces, and smiles as Mio’s kanzashi chime softly. This is a first, almost unheard of, to have so many leaders all gathered in one place, regardless of old grudges. And maybe it isn’t easy, maybe there are still tense silences between some and uneasy truces between others, but when five of the most powerful nations come together and say enough fighting, enough war, we want peace—well, people listen. And if they don’t want to be left behind, they agree.

“A good day for speeches,” Terumi Mei murmurs from his left, leaning back against the wall with
her arms crossed over her chest. She’s smiling, small and satisfied, and her gaze is on her ninja as well. There’s a light to it, pride and contentment, and Naruto lets himself smile back, because whatever Kiri used to be, it’s changed now, and Naruto is more than willing to accept that.

“A good day for peace,” he agrees, and grins as he catches Haku watching him. He twiddles his fingers in a short, cheeky wave, and Haku huffs visibly, eyes narrowing in wordless chastisement. But it’s not nearly enough to stop Naruto from being himself, and he just beams back, hearing the muffled laughter from his father, who’s grouped with the other resurrected Hokage on the other side of the balcony. Even Kabuto is present, though he’s keeping back to the shadows below, and Naruto feels so perfectly settled he’s not sure there are words for it.

Sasuke is watching, too. It’s impossible easy for Naruto to pick him out of the crowd, standing with Ino near the far wall, and his eyes haven’t left Naruto for more than a few seconds since this whole thing started.

Tsunade steps forward, vivid in red robes, and silence spreads like ripples on water as she takes center stage.

“Usually,” she says with faintly wry amusement, voice carrying over the square, “I’d save the speeches for the genin who make it to the final round. But this is something different. Different circumstances, a different time. I don’t want the first thing you hear from us to be talk of war, because we’re better than that. We have our pride, and our strength, but we don’t have to go to war to show it. Many of you fought, when Madara’s forces invaded. Many of you were wounded. Many of you spilled blood to protect Konoha, even though it isn’t your home. You did it because there was a threat to this world, and because we are shinobi. Because we protect, and we fight for our homes, our families, our dreams.”

A low cheer, from too many throats to pick out those responsible, and it makes Naruto smile, makes his heart twist in his chest, two sizes too large. Tsunade is smiling, too, and she unrolls the scroll she’s carrying it, raising it up until the seat row of signatures on it is entirely visible.

“Peace,” she says, and it ripples out over the crowd, low and firm and intense enough to send a thrum through Naruto’s very bones. Standing behind her, clad in Otoku’s white and purple, Orochimaru shifts slightly, gaze flickering to where Jiraiya is leaning against a building and watching with a happy grin. “That’s the opportunity Madara left us with. He threatened our world, threatened those who sacrificed or were sacrificed in the name of peace.” Tsunade inclines her head to the six jinchuuriki in the very middle of the square, and maybe once there would have been space around them, a wary buffer, but Kumo nin crowd in on one side, Konoha nin on the other, and Uzushio nin take up all the remaining space that’s to be had, not leaving an extra inch.

She raises her voice again, over the murmur of recognition that rolls through the crowd, and says fiercely, “Never again. This will be our peace. Together, and balanced. It will be hard. It will take time. But never again do I want to see villages destroyed, or needless deaths. We are your Kage, your leaders, your village heads, and we may only be human, but that’s enough. These Exams will go forward, but not as a proxy for war. This time, we stand for honor shared, for countries working together without bloodshed. Will you stand with us?”

Naruto closes his eyes as a hundred throats cry their agreement back, as he stands side by side with the other leaders, Uzushio rebuilt and given a place once more, and smiles. He looks out again, finding faces in the crowd, Fū cheering and Utakata laughing and Gaara smiling, Roushi bellowing his approval and Haku with something close to wonder on his face. Finds Sakura with tears on her cheeks, Minato beaming, and then—

Sasuke, watching him still, a faint smile tilting his lips and contentment in every line of his face.
Naruto smiles, winks, and blows a kiss, and Sasuke smiles back.

This isn’t the end of it. There will be hard work ahead of them, to keep this peace treaty strong. Failures and petty arguments and days where it seems like everything will come crashing down around them, but Naruto knows bone-deep and soul-steady that there will never be a time when it won’t be worth it.

Not for peace. Not for a world where they don’t have to make senseless sacrifices. Not for a world where there will be no more village lost or lives wasted.

For peace, for a world where they can live and love and build their dreams—that is worth every moment of work and hardship, and Naruto lifts his smile to the sun above and adds his voice to the cheer.
Encore

Chapter Notes

(So much for shortly. /dies) BUT IT’S DONE. OMFG, I FINISHED IT.

I’d like this to be my thank you to all of the amazing, incredible people who have put up with my weirdness and random disappearances and everything else. You are awesome, and I love and appreciate you all. I’m (probably) not going to be starting any more epics for at least a month or two, but as always I am totally open to whatever prompts you want to throw at me. Even if plot bunnies don’t bite immediately, I put every idea away in a folder and let it stew.

Again, thank you so much for sticking with Stormborn. It’s my silly self-indulgent baby, and I’m so very grateful that other people have enjoyed my ridiculousness. *huggles*

[Encore: An additional performance added to the end of a concert.]

Two years later:

The city feels old and new in the same breath, in a way that would be impossible were the city any but Naruto’s. Sasuke strides through the square before the Administrative Center, over the lines of the transportation seal etched into the stone, and all around him are old buildings, weathered and worn and rebuilt. But between them are signs of all the things made new again, windows replaced and shops rebuilt and people still settling in, even after nearly nine years.

He remembers what Naruto said, that day in the market when he was still Youko to Sasuke, a lead to Naruto and nothing more. Naruto had said that Konoha was painted in earth tones, while Uzushio was sea and sky and sunset. It’s true, and of the people as well as the city. There’s red hair aplenty here, and it’s strange, even two years on, to look around and not see the brown hair predominant in Konoha, but red and grey and blue and blond.

But it’s a good village. It’s a good place to call home, without the burden of the Uchiha name that Konoha has, willingly or not, always held. Here, Sasuke is not the last loyal Uchiha, but Konoha’s envoy, the Uzukage’s partner. There’s peace, and happiness, and if everything is still slightly imperfect, well. It’s a shinobi village, and one filled with Uzumaki at that. Sasuke could hardly expect anything different.

At the door of the building, Sasuke steps aside, allowing a girl with long red hair to go barreling past, another girl with short blue behind her. Aki laughs, almost tripping over her own feet, as the other—one of Fū’s former genin, he thinks, though he can’t put a name to her face—shouts curses and lunges for her. They bolt around the side of the building, raising cries of indignation from people in the street, and disappear towards the market district. Sasuke just rolls his eyes, by now well used to the complete lack of dignity and formality in Uzushio’s shinobi, and ducks through the doorway, almost crashing into Aki’s twin and Fū’s other former kunoichi.

“Did they—?” Natsu starts.

Wordlessly, Sasuke points in the direction the two girls disappeared, and the boy mutters something
impolite and gives chase.

Sasuke can't imagine any other shinobi anywhere treating their Kage's office like this, but it's Naruto. It's Uzushio. And that's enough of a difference to change everything. He smiles to himself, just a little, and lets the door swing closed behind him as he crosses to the stairs and leaps up them two at a time. There's no rush, no need to get anywhere quickly, but...Naruto is in his office, and they have plans for lunch. It's only been a few hours since he dragged himself out of their bed, whining about paperwork, but even that is long enough for Sasuke to miss him.

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As ever, Karin is seated at the desk outside the Uzukage's door, sifting through mounds of paperwork and muttering to herself, spotted with ink and somewhere between homicidally aggravated and ridiculously content. She gives him the evil eye as he passes—something about distracting the Uzukage during his only productive period of the day, and undermining her attempts to bribe him with food, if he remembers past rants correctly—but only warns, “If I hear any suspicious noises, I'm getting Suigetsu and having him flood the room.”

Sasuke attempts not to roll his eyes too visibly, and inclines his head before slipping through the wide doors to Naruto's office. It's a big, open room, with light spilling through the wide windows and giving it a warm glow, and the inviting air is only compounded by the wide, delighted smile Naruto gives him as he looks up.

“Sasuke!” he cries happily, like they hadn't already had plans to meet, and Sasuke crosses to his side in four long strides and leans down to kiss him, because he can't physically do otherwise. Naruto says his name like Sasuke's presence in his life is marvelous, is a marvel, and just—how is Sasuke supposed to get used to that?

He hasn't yet, and he's absolutely certain that he never will.

“Lunch,” he reminds Naruto as they break apart, slightly breathless. He'd try for more, but Karin’s words are less threat and more dire warning. Sasuke has tested her before, and it didn’t end well for anyone.

Naruto takes a quick look at his desk—mostly clear, honestly, because he takes his position seriously, and Sasuke finds it somewhere between endearing and strangely hot—and then grins, pushing back his chair and rising to his feet with a faint stretch. “Awesome,” he enthuses, grinning, and the bells in his hair chime as he steps around the desk and right up next to Sasuke. “If I have to look at one more of the Daimyo’s tax proposals I’m going to set something on fire.”

As if on cue, there's a dull whump, an earth-shaking roar, and the southern window explodes inward in a shower of glass. Sasuke lunges for Naruto automatically, throwing himself on top of the blond and bearing them both to the ground as shards rain down around them. From their position on the floor, he can half-see the column of unnervingly black smoke billowing towards the sky, and the faintest hint of flames beneath it.

Naruto jabs an elbow into his side and wriggles out from under him with an annoyed huff, and Sasuke, seeing that nothing else has exploded in the last ten seconds, allows the escape. He stands, shaking glass from his clothes, and then shadows Naruto as he crunches his way to the gaping window and leans out.

The wing of the Administration Center that holds the Jounin Standby Station is burning. There are a few people fleeing towards the outskirts of the city, but most of them are congregating, calling inquiries and concerns. Sasuke has to roll his eyes, because honestly. What other shinobi village would treat pieces of their Kage’s seat of power blowing up as if it were just an ordinary day?
“Oh, no,” Naruto groans, slapping his hands over his face. “Oh my god, the paperwork.” Sasuke gives him an incredulous look, but he ignores it, leaning out further and bellowing, “Hey! Anyone hurt?”

From the edge of the crowd, Fū waves a cheerful hello and calls back, “Nope! That part of the wing was empty!”

Naruto's eyes narrow, and Sasuke raises a brow, because in the middle of the day, on a Tuesday? There should have been at least some jounin there. Clearly, someone is up to something, and if it ends in buildings exploding, it’s…

Actually probably the standard, for Uzushio. Sasuke pinches the bridge of his nose and reassures himself yet again that insanity is not catching.

“Was Kabuto or any of his chemicals involved?” Naruto shouts, though his gimlet glare is still fixed on Fū.

“Nope, you're good!”

Naruto mutters something uncomplimentary, then runs through three hand signs in quick succession. From the bay, a funnel of water rises, stretching up towards the clear sky and then bending forward. The far end pulls up, and from the center of the funnel a torrent of water pours down on the blaze, drenching it and the bystanders in seconds. Shrieks rise, startled and offended, but when the jutsu finishes the fire is out, and the building is still (mostly) standing.

“Naruto!” Fū screeches.

“This is your fault!” Naruto bellows back. “I know it is, Fū! And I swear, you are going to be the one doing all of the paperwork for this, so help me!”

Fū shoots him a venomous glare, but slinks off to the side and pointedly starts wringing out her skirt. It’s as good as a confession, coming from her.

Naruto groans and whacks his head against the window frame a few times. “Agh. I don’t even want to know, do I?”

“I believe,” Gaara says precisely, from where he’s leaning in the doorway with Haku right behind him, “that Fū and several of our former genin attempted to lock Utakata and Ookami Koto in a closet.”

“And no one thought this sounded like a bad idea?” Naruto asks despairingly. “That’s it. I’ve had it. Put them all on D-rank missions pending assessment. Make them nasty.”

“Yes, Uzukage-sama,” Gaara murmurs, inclining his head.

There's a moment of silence, and then Naruto glances over his shoulder, expression surprised. “You're…not arguing with me. Or placating me,” he says slowly, as if still coming to this conclusion. Then surprise shades to suspicion, and he turns, crossing his arms over his chest. “Okay. Spill, Gaara.”

The redhead simply raises a nonexistent brow and keeps his mouth firmly shut.

Haku gives the other man an amused glance, then looks at Naruto and offers, “I believe Gaara won the betting pool.”
Naruto gives him a dark look, eyes narrowing, and growls, “Explain.”

“On how long it would be until something blew up or caught on fire,” Gaara clarifies, voice level and entirely unrepentant. “There is a standing bet that resets after every incident. I predicted that it would be by midday.”

“And this would have absolutely nothing to do with the fact that some of your genin just locked a jinchuuriki and an Ookami up in a very small, confined space, right?” Naruto is rubbing his temples, looking pained. Sasuke glances between the three of them, then out the window at the charred, soggy building, and leans back against the wall to watch the show.

Gaara very carefully says nothing.

“I hate you,” Naruto tells him, and then glares at a giggling Haku as well. “And I hate you too. You are trying to kill me, and you don’t even have the decency to do it head-on. Instead you’re trying to murder me with paperwork.”

“I’ve been told that suffering builds character,” Gaara counters, as mild as milk.

Naruto growls at him, then at Haku, who’s still laughing, and spins away, bells chiming almost menacingly as he leans out the window and bellows, “Fū! I’m going to drown you!”

Because she’s many, many things, but definitely not an idiot, Fū bolts. With a snarl like the fox living in his head, Naruto leaps right out the window and gives chase.

Sasuke rolls his eyes so hard it hurts, berates himself for being a romantic sap unwilling to give up even this much of a lunch date, and goes after him.

On a hill overlooking a city that glows white and red and gold under the noonday sun, Obito pauses, taking in the gout of smoke, the sound of distant, tinny screams, and the surges of multicolored chakra rising in the streets. He blinks, brows rising, and then glances over at his companion in silent question.

Kakashi looks both faintly pained and slightly nostalgic. He studies the city over the top of his ever-present porn—one more battle Obito has yet to win when it comes to this ridiculous man—and then gives Obito a sideways look. “Hmm,” is all he offers.

Obito eyes the other man for a moment, remembering the absolute glee with which he’d waved Kagami off when Obito’s father had finally decided to return to Azami and the Pure Land, after nearly three months traveling with them. Remembering how happy Kakashi was to finally get some peace, quiet, and alone time with Obito now that he’s more or less settled in this new life. He takes another look at the madness taking place below them, just in time to see a tsunami-size wave rise from the bay and hover there, threatening, as the shouts rise in volume.

He wants to see Naruto again, the boy with such conviction that it made him waver, falter, when he had thought nothing could. But—

“Maybe we should come back when they’re a little less busy,” he suggests, trying to keep the fairly dubious note out of his voice.

Kakashi looks at him, looks at the wave that’s moving again, chasing a small, shrieking figure across
the bay, and nods agreeably. “Why not,” he approves, and steps closer to loop an arm over Obito's shoulders.

Obito grimaces at the book now dangerously close to his face, and uses the very tip of one finger to push it away. He tries very hard not to look too closely at a suspicious stain on one of the open pages. “Hatake, if you don’t put that thing away, I’m going to drop it in a dimension filled with lava. Are we clear?”

“Maa, maa, Obito. It’s literature,” Kakashi protests, but the book disappears before Obito can make good on his threat, and the Copy-Nin gives him a pout that would be a lot more effective if he wasn’t closing on forty.

“And I’m a unicorn,” Obito mutters, but he lets Kakashi press himself up against his side without protest, maybe possibly leans a little bit closer even though he’d never admit it under pain of death.

Kakashi side-eyes him in a way that means whatever comes out of his mouth next is definitely going to make Obito want to throttle him. “Oh?” Kakashi asks innocently. “Is that why you're always so horny—urk!”

Obito feels absolutely not one single drop of remorse as he attempts to stuff a pair of socks down Kakashi’s throat. They're Kakashi's own, after all, and if Obito didn’t check whether they were dirty or not first, well.

For that comment, Kakashi deserves it. And worse.

As the Copy-Nin gags and claws at his mouth, Obito casts once last look at Uzushio, and smiles a little to himself before letting Kamui whirl them away.

They're leaving, yes, but the journey is far from over. And maybe next time they pass through, it will finally be on their way home for good.

\textit{acta est fabula}

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